

**THE MAKING OF
A CLASSIC**

LIFE

**WHY THE STORY
ENDURES**

KING KONG

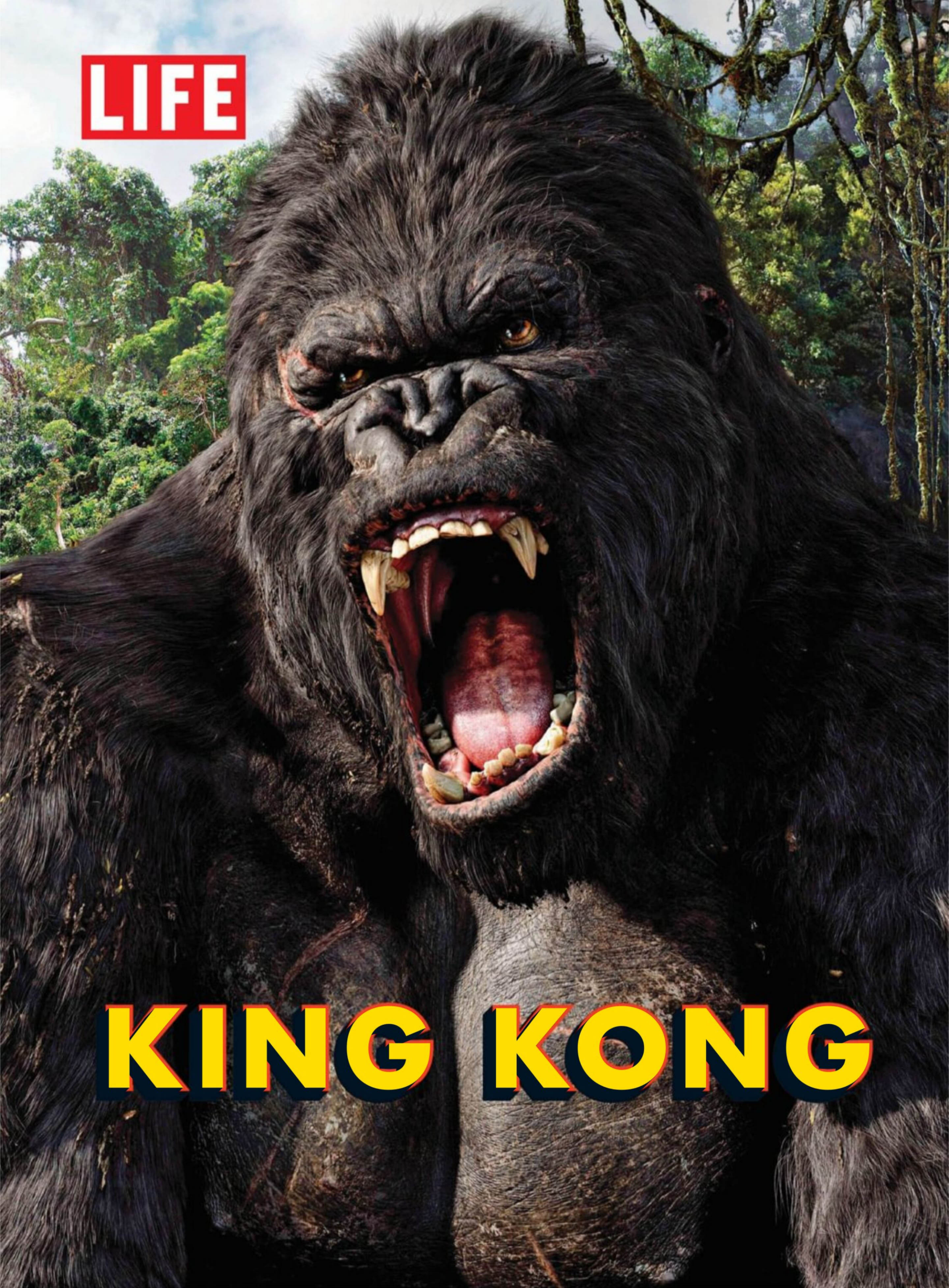
The Movies. The Creature. The Message.

**90
YEARS**

**Hollywood's Most
Influential
Film**



**PLUS
All the
Remarkable
Sequels**



LIFE

KING KONG

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NAOMI WATTS PLAYED ANN Darrow in Peter Jackson's critically acclaimed 2005 *King Kong* remake. Watts's turn as the most famous damsel in distress earned her a Saturn Award for Best Actress.

Prologue

APES OF WRATH

By Steve
Rushin

KING KONG MAY HAVE INFLUENCED MORE MOVIES THAN ANY OTHER. THAT'S BECAUSE KONG IS NOT ONLY FEROCIOUS, HE'S SOULFUL—A MONSTER WITH HUMAN DIGNITY.

H

E HAD HER IN THE PALM OF HIS HAND. THE HOLLYWOOD PRODUCER MERIAN COOPER

pitched the starlet Fay Wray with a promise for his next picture: “You will have the tallest, darkest leading man in Hollywood.” Wray pictured herself in the arms of Cary Grant, with whom she had starred on Broadway the year before, in 1931. She found herself instead in the eight-foot grip of a disembodied gorilla hand suspended six feet off the floor by a crane. Her costar turned out to be an 18-inch articulated model that would appear—on screens around the world, for the next 90 years—as a 40-foot-tall prehistoric beast named King Kong. ¶ Wray spent much of the making of *King Kong* screaming into a void at RKO studios. In postproduction, Wray screamed a fuller menu of screams—an “aria of agonies,” like a operatic soprano singing scales. “Scream!” Cooper would scream at her. “Scream for your life, Fay!” The screams

TO SHOWCASE HIS ENORMOUS size and strength—and to perhaps explain how he could climb the tallest building in the world—Universal showed eight normal-sized apes stacked next to King Kong.



RKO PICTURES LOBBY CARDS (this one is from 1942) are still sold and traded today. Actor Fay Wray, top right, helped define what it meant to be a Hollywood starlet in the 20th century, pairing wit and beauty on the silver screen for more than six decades.



KING KONG
is loose!



that made the final cut of *King Kong*—far too many screams, Wray thought—last three minutes and 37 seconds when spliced end to end on YouTube. “There was one day when I screamed all day long,” recalled Wray, Hollywood’s original scream queen, a title contested but never usurped by Janet Leigh in *Psycho* and Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween* and a thousand other actors in movies that pay homage, in ways large and small, to *King Kong*.

King Kong may have influenced more movies than any other film in history. It has been imitated almost without pause for the 90 years since its release in 1933. Kong has aped himself in two big-budget blockbusters—in the 1976 *King Kong* and again in the 2005 *King Kong*. He is the star of present-day CGI blockbusters like *Kong: Skull Island* and *Godzilla vs. Kong*. But Kong has had an opposable thumb in dozens of other famous movies whose directors were in thrall to the cinematic simian from an early age.

In the original *Kong*, the title character doesn’t appear until halfway through the film, much the way Steven Spielberg would withhold the full shark from *Jaws* for 81 agonizing minutes. All those dinosaurs in *Kong* confined behind a wall on Skull Island, stalked by a city slicker who recognizes their commercial value? They prefigured by 60 years the *Jurassic Park* franchise. “What do they got in there—King Kong?” asks Jeff Goldblum’s smug character in Spielberg’s first *Jurassic Park*, while standing at the theme park’s imposing gates, modeled on the gates of Kong’s Skull Island enclosure. (In *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, Spielberg named a cargo ship the S.S. *Venture*, after the ship that transported Kong to New York City in the original film.)

King Kong was among the first talkies that commanded the audience to talk back, the kind of camp-horror blockbuster that begged for a dialogue between audience and ape, if only to relieve the tension. “This picture was received by many a giggle to cover up the fright,” the *New York Times* reviewer Mordaunt Hall reported from the film’s world premiere at Rockefeller Center,



in the depths of the Great Depression. “Constant exclamations issued from the Radio City Music Hall yesterday. ‘What a man!’ observed one youth when the ape forced down the great oaken door on the island.”

What a man indeed. Kong was not literally played by a man in a gorilla suit, but the reverse is nearly true. He was given life by a man with an interior gorilla forever trying to get out. Willis O’Brien was the native Californian who animated King Kong, though “Kong” was really three metal models, each 18 to 22 inches tall, jointed and covered in rabbit fur, and painstakingly shot frame by frame in stop motion. In 2009, the 22-inch metal “armature” used in the film’s final scenes, denuded of its fur, sold at auction for nearly \$200,000.

It was O’Brien who breathed into Kong not only physical grace but soul and pathos and vulnerability. He imbued his monster with human dignity. “[O’Brien] compensated for a life filled with tragedy and disappointment by pouring into his work an unsurpassed imagination, dedication, and exuberance,” Kong scholar George E. Turner wrote in his authoritative history, first published in 1975, called *The Making of King Kong*. “Those who knew him say that O’Brien was Kong, recognizable on the screen in every gesture and reaction.”

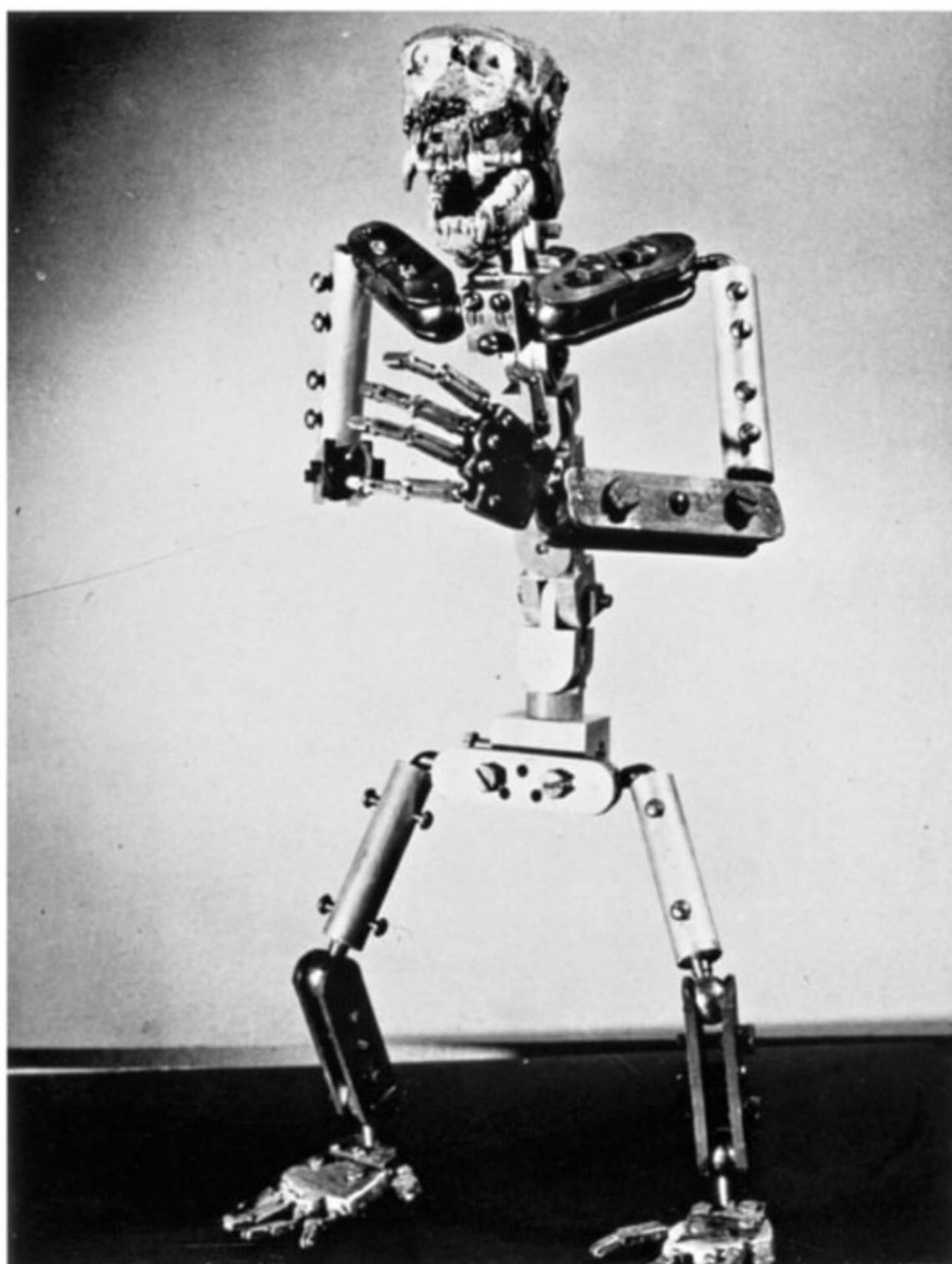
Born before film, in 1886, O’Brien left his home in Oakland, California, as a child and embarked, at 13, on an itinerant life as a farmhand and factory worker, cowboy and cartoonist, boxer and bartender. At the dawn of cinema, he was already leading a cinematic life, with burgeoning interests in everything from sculpture to dinosaurs. He combined these two to great effect in the 1925 silent epic *The Lost World*, in which O’Brien resurrected prehistoric creatures on screen. Ninety years after that film premiered, the director John Landis said, “People are still copying the way he made dinosaurs move.”

The fight between Kong and the *Tyrannosaurus rex* in *King Kong* was choreographed as meticulously as

Sylvester Stallone would later stage the Rocky bouts, thanks to the former boxer O’Brien’s intimate knowledge of the fight game. Any movie pitting two titanic opponents—Mothra vs. Godzilla, Alien vs. Predator, Superman vs. Batman—owes a debt to that seminal Kong vs. Rex slugfest.

A MERE SIX MONTHS AFTER *Kong* was released, so too was its first parody, *King Klunk*, a Walter Lantz cartoon short that ran before main attractions in movie theaters nationwide. But the genre that *King Kong* really kicked off was the King Kong flick. The 1933 original spawned a monkey see, monkey do succession of sequels, spin-offs and remakes, beginning the very same

INSPIRED BY LITERATURE AS A boy and by travels abroad as an adult, Merian Cooper (opposite) was the brains behind 1933’s blockbuster *King Kong*. This skeletal frame used in the movie was auctioned in 2009 for nearly \$200,000.



year with *Son of Kong* and continuing into the 21st century with the \$200 million CGI blockbuster *King Kong* (2005), directed by *Lord of the Rings* auteur Peter Jackson, yet another filmmaker bewitched—as a boy in New Zealand—by the original.

“Viewing *King Kong* as a nine-year-old was the moment that I thought, I want to make movies,” said Jackson. “I want to be able to make movies just like *King Kong*.”

Kong was introduced to a new generation of fans and filmmakers through ubiquitous replays on television, starting in 1956, when WOR-TV in New York featured it two times a night for a full week. WOR was an RKO General station, owned by the General Tire and Rubber Company, which had purchased RKO and its library the year before. Eventually, the annual airing of Kong would become a Thanksgiving Day tradition in New York. For decades, Kong aired on other independent stations across America on Saturday mornings, counterprogramming the network cartoons and besotting viewers like Quentin Tarantino, who thinks the film’s enduring appeal stems from the humanity imparted to Kong by his animator.

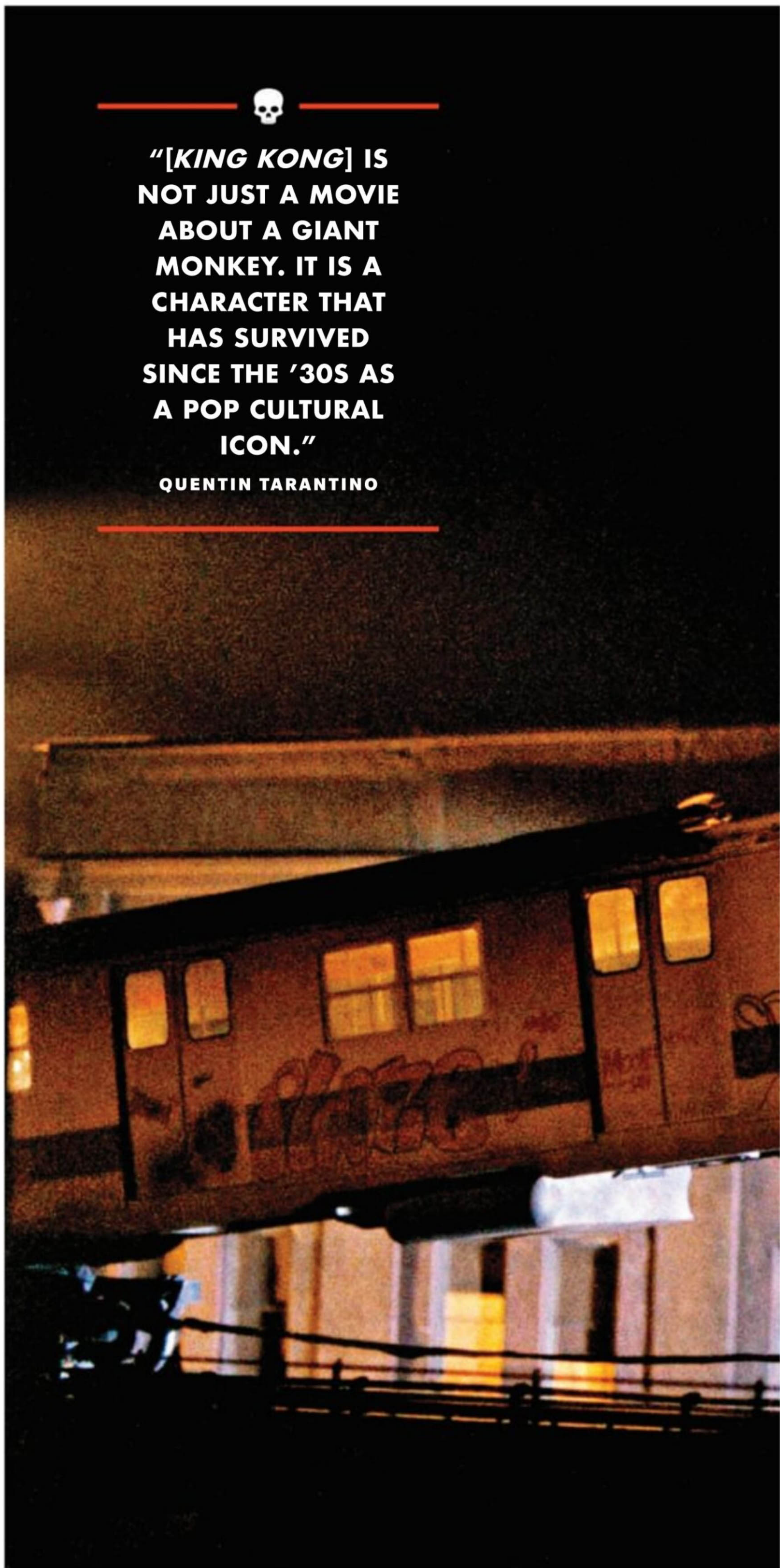
“The true auteur of *King Kong* is Willis O’Brien,” Tarantino told his fellow director Eli Roth on the latter’s TV show *History of Horror*. “If you look at the original posters of *King Kong*, Kong is far more a monster, and he has teeth almost like saber-toothed tiger canines. Willis got rid of all the monstrous touches and the whole idea was to make him as human as possible, and so we respond to Kong not as a monster but as a true character. That is why the movie is not just a movie about a giant monkey. It is a character that has survived since the ’30s as a pop cultural icon.”

Tarantino has a Nazi character ruminate on the larger significance of *King Kong* in his 2009 film, *Inglourious Basterds*. For decades, Kong has been a Rorschach test, a symbol of many things to many people. He is the subject of studies on religion—Kong, worshiped as a god, is lashed to the



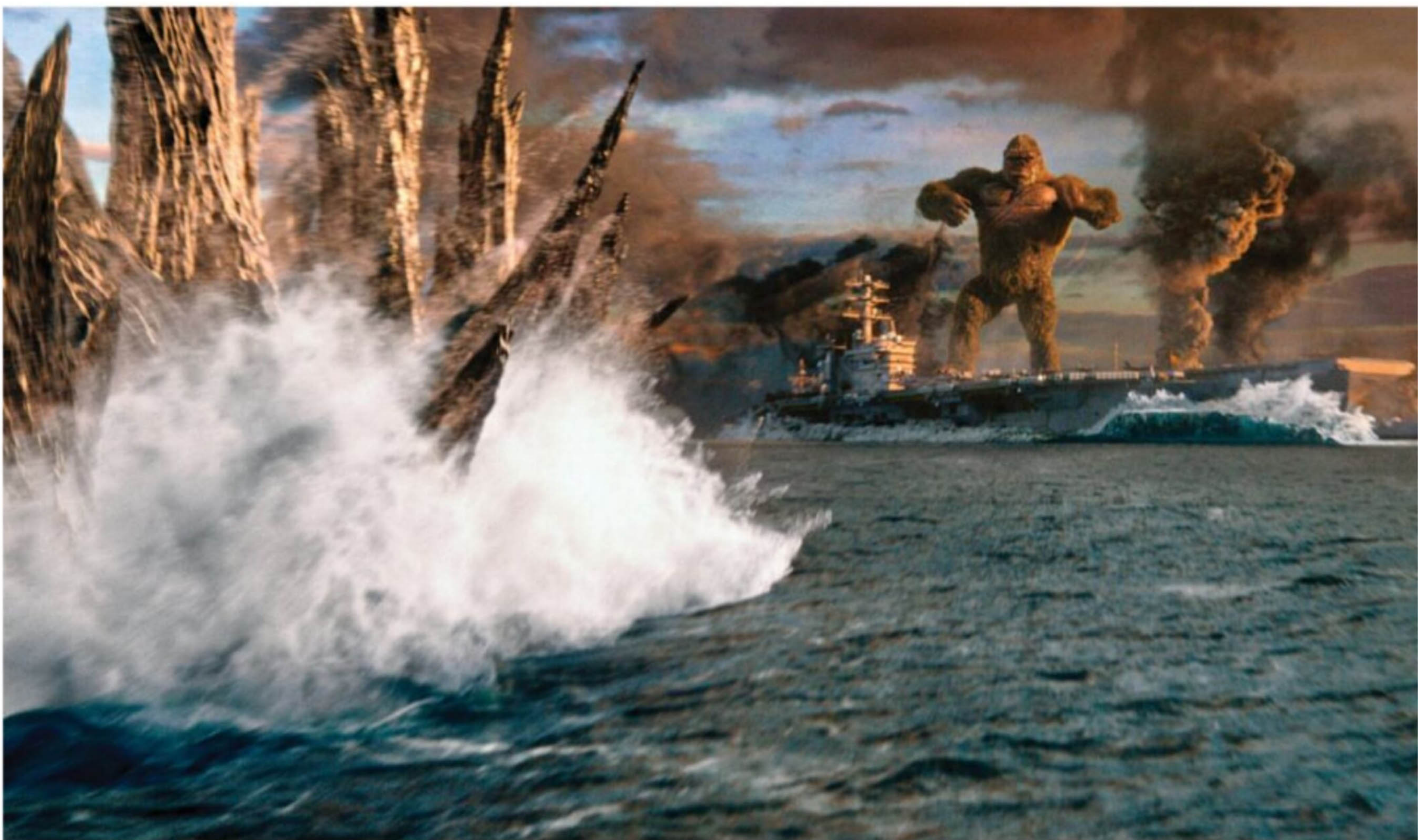
**“[KING KONG] IS
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ICON.”**

QUENTIN TARANTINO





CULTURALLY, HISTORICALLY, and aesthetically significant, the 1933 *King Kong* has earned a place in the Library of Congress. After all, few other primates can lift a train with such ease, as Kong did in the 1976 remake.





SINCE THE CHARACTER'S inception, every generation has gotten its own version of King Kong, including 2017's *Skull Island* (top), 2021's *Godzilla vs. Kong* (left), and Netflix's 2023 animated series. Up next: *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire*, in theaters in 2024.

scaffolding in a messianic pose—and on sex. The scene in which King Kong begins to remove Ann Darrow's clothes was itself removed in future showings by the Hays Code, Hollywood's self-imposed prohibition against profanity, graphic violence, and sex that lasted from 1934 to 1968. Maurice Sendak, author and illustrator of *Where the Wild Things Are*, thought Kong was about this “giant sex-crazed gorilla” and the phallic new skyscraper that he scaled. The whole picture was “bound up with so much primal passion, fear, [and] sexual anxiety,” Sendak suggested in *Kong Unbound: The Cultural Impact, Pop Myths and Scientific Plausibility of a Cinematic Legend*. “God knows all those things are in Kong. And the majesty and the horror; I know I loved him. I loved him and suffered terribly every time he was killed.”

Kong is killed and reborn with every screening. Kong is not merely

a character that has survived, in Tarantino's phrase, as a pop culture icon; he has survived in other movie characters that have become pop culture icons themselves. In *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), Slim Pickens plays Major “King” Kong, a cowboy-hat-waving Texan who disappears in a mushroom cloud after riding a bomb, like a bucking bronco, into our nuclear winter. As Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976), Robert De Niro literally wears Kong on his sleeve. A patch on his army jacket identifies Bickle's unit in Vietnam as KING KONG COMPANY. While simultaneously menacing and “rescuing” the trafficked child played by Jodie Foster, Bickle runs rampant in New York City. “We wanted him to look like a monster,” director Martin Scorsese told the critic Roger Ebert. “King Kong coming to save Fay Wray.”

Denzel Washington's corrupt LAPD detective Alonzo Harris in *Training Day* (2001) tells the beleaguered citizens of the neighborhood he has terrorized that he is indestructible. “You can shoot me,” shouts Harris, “but you can't kill me!” Harris leaves death and torment in his wake, but we know his hubris will get the best of him when he screams: “King Kong ain't got s--- on me!” One of the century's most famous actors, in his most famous role, utters his most famous line. And it is proof yet again that King Kong (unlike Harris) really can't be killed.

In sequels, remakes, and reimaginings, in movies and songs and theme-park rides, in all manner of pop culture flotsam, King Kong survives. “Something went wrong for Fay Wray and King Kong,” goes a song in the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. “They got caught in a celluloid jam.” But the ape carries on, even as the world around him turns to ash. Those imposing gates to Skull Island, re-created in Jurassic Park? The originals were destroyed by fire, on the RKO lot, in the burning of Atlanta scene in *Gone with the Wind*. And yet 90 years after he fell from the Empire State Building, Kong stays in the picture. The King is dead, long live the King. ■

Chapter One

THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD



A VISUAL, AUDIO, AND SPECIAL-EFFECTS
BREAKTHROUGH, *KING KONG* AND ITS LEADING
MAN PUT THEIR GRIP ON THE WORLD'S TALLEST
BUILDING, AND ON THE PUBLIC AT LARGE.







K

ING KONG WAS the product of many hands, not all of them eight feet wide and hairy. But the story at the heart

of the movie, and of all the mythology that followed, begins with one man, a larger-than-life figure, like his brainchild.

Beginning in his Florida childhood, Merian Coldwell Cooper was afflicted with wanderlust. At six, in the late 1890s, he was transfixed by *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa*, a book given to him by an uncle. “A story in one of the book’s chapters about a tribe of ferocious giant gorillas that attacked a native village also caught his eye,” noted Ray Morton in *King Kong*, his history of the film’s many iterations.

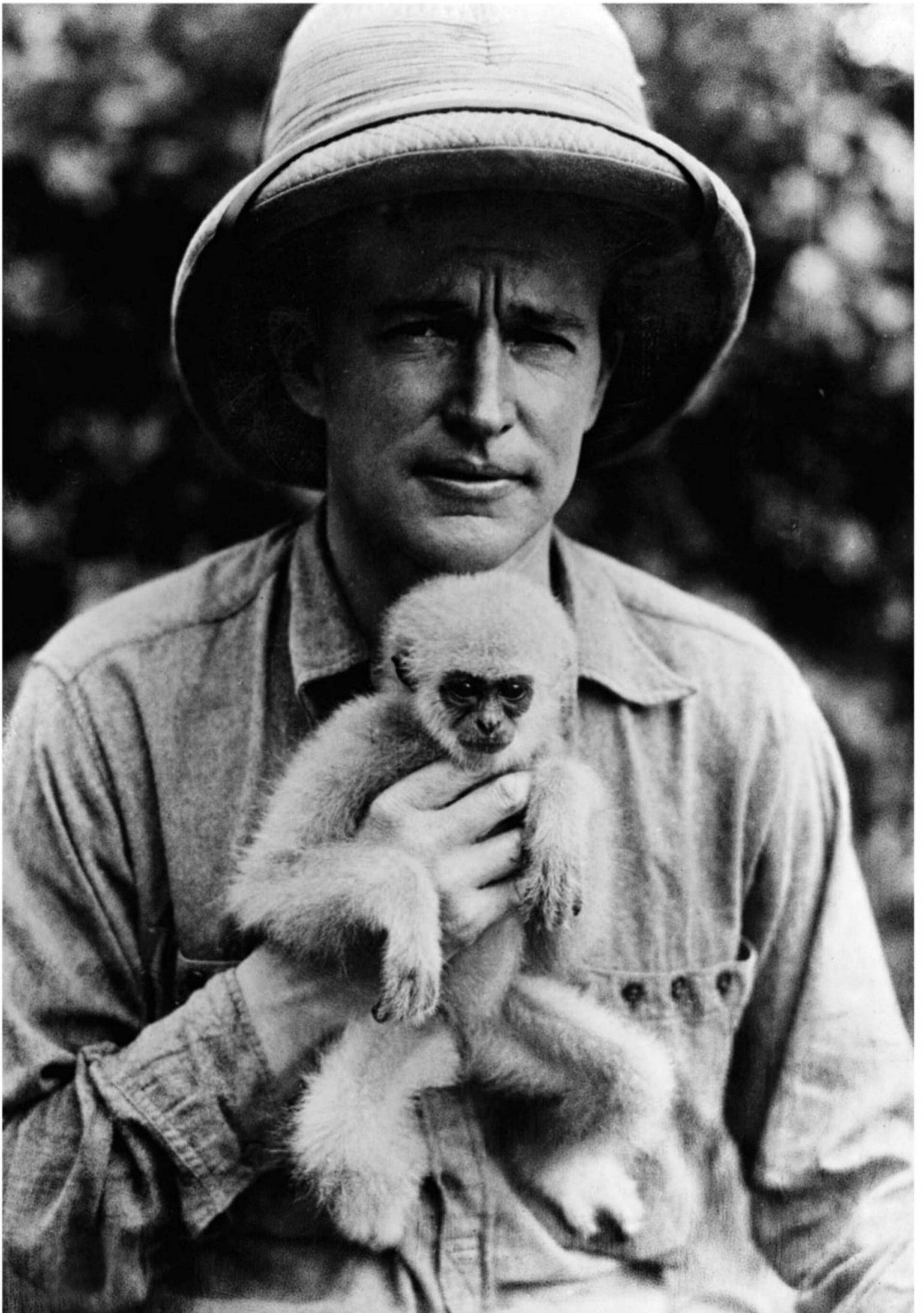
“An incident in which one of the apes carried a female villager off into the jungle especially intrigued him.”

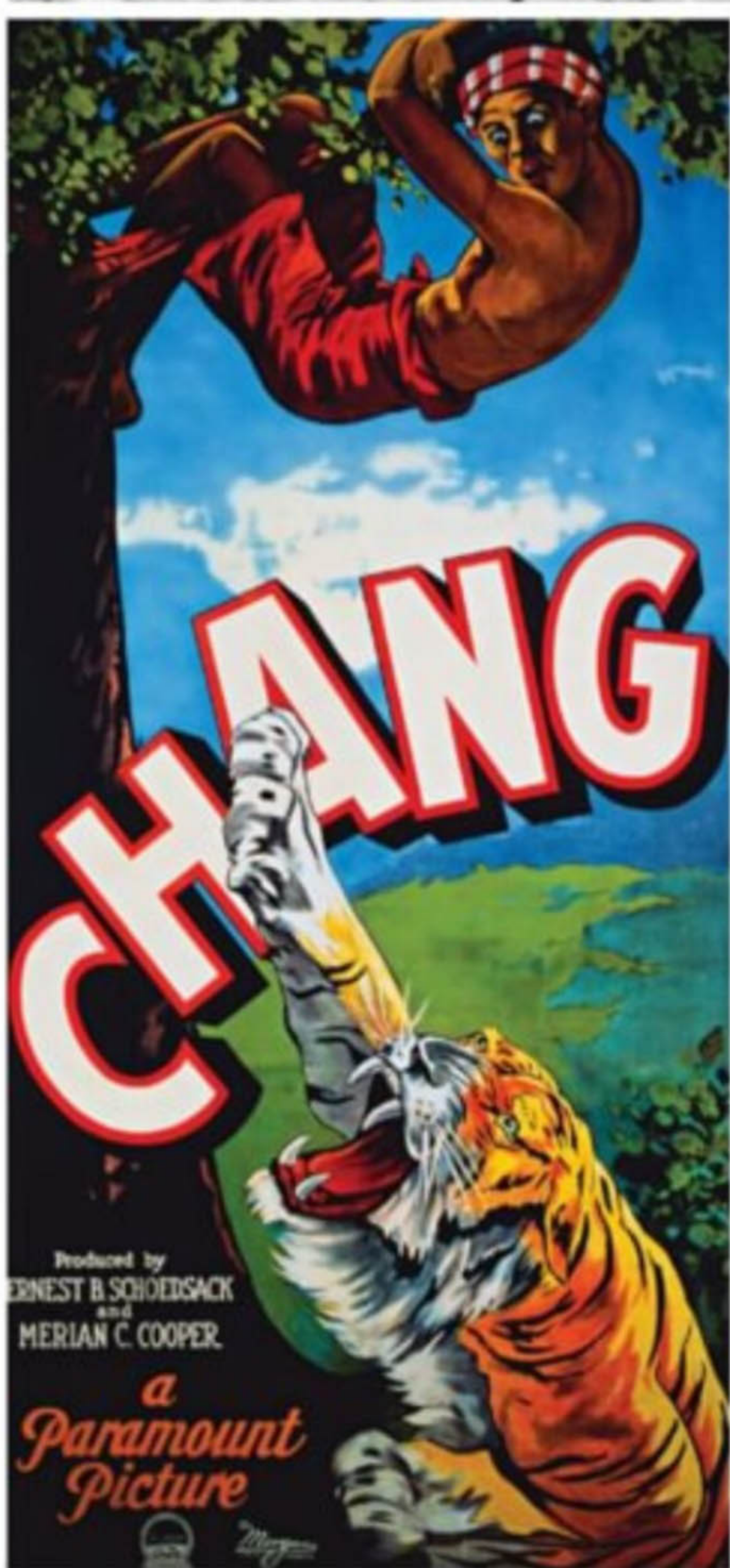
In his teens, Cooper had already worked as a newspaper reporter in Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Des Moines before joining the U.S. Army’s Air Service as a bombardier. In 1920 Cooper was shot down over Russia while piloting a bomber during the Polish-Soviet War and spent nine months in a Soviet prisoner of war camp before escaping overland to Latvia. For better and worse, he had already fulfilled his childhood dream of exploring the world, but it was after that war that Cooper would hit the road in earnest.

The years between the two world wars were a golden age of discovery. The British archaeologist Howard Carter and his benefactor, Lord Carnarvon, pushed through a plaster door in



KING KONG CREATORS AND travel companions Ernest Schoedsack, left, and Merian Cooper in 1927 (top). **Opposite:** Cooper on adventure in 1927. **Above:** An illustration from French American traveler Paul du Chaillu’s *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa*.





CHANG, THE SECOND SILENT film by Schoedsack and Cooper (above, on set in 1927), featured tigers, elephants, and leopards terrorizing a farmer in northern Thailand, something of a precursor to *King Kong's* debut six years later.

Egypt's Valley of the Kings in 1922 and saw glinting in the candlelight the golden treasures of King Tut's tomb. William Beebe plumbed the depths of the oceans in his "bathysphere," a steampunk submersible that Jules Verne would have envied. Charles Lindbergh took off in New York in his monoplane on May 20, 1927, and landed 33½ hours later outside Paris, returning to earth as one of the world's most famous men. The waiting throng at Le Bourget airfield tore at the *Spirit of St. Louis* before Lindbergh could deplane, and then tore at his garments once he did.

In that same spirit of discovery, in that same decade, Merian Cooper traveled abroad with his filmmaker friend Ernest Schoedsack, a six-foot-six Iowa native who had been a combat cameraman in the Great War, documenting the conflict on film. Together, Cooper and Schoedsack went looking for trouble—or more specifically, looking

to film exotic scenes overseas to screen for audiences of armchair travelers at home. The litmus test the men devised for their misadventures was "Make It Distant, Difficult, and Dangerous."

"Merian Cooper was a fascinating combination of high imagination, an implicitly rebellious nature, a political conservative, an intellect, an adventurer, and a visionary," wrote Fay Wray. "He had a strongly chivalrous nature." On the first film they worked on together, *The Four Feathers*, Cooper frequently had orchids delivered to Wray's dressing room.

In *King Kong*, the character standing in for Cooper is Carl Denham. As played by Robert Armstrong, Denham is a man who will go anywhere and risk anything for 40 minutes of film. "They say he ain't scared of nothing," says the watchman guarding the *Venture* in the port of New York at the start of *King Kong*. "If he wants a picture of a lion, he just goes up to

him and tells him to look pleasant.”

And that’s more or less what Cooper and Schoedsack did on their travels. Their trip to Persia, following the Bakhtiari tribe’s seasonal migration, became the ethnographic documentary *Grass* (1926). Their trip to Thailand became *Chang* (1927), in which a farmer, fighting for survival, defends his soil against tigers and elephants. In these silent movies, hybrids of documentary and staged drama, were the roots of *King Kong*.

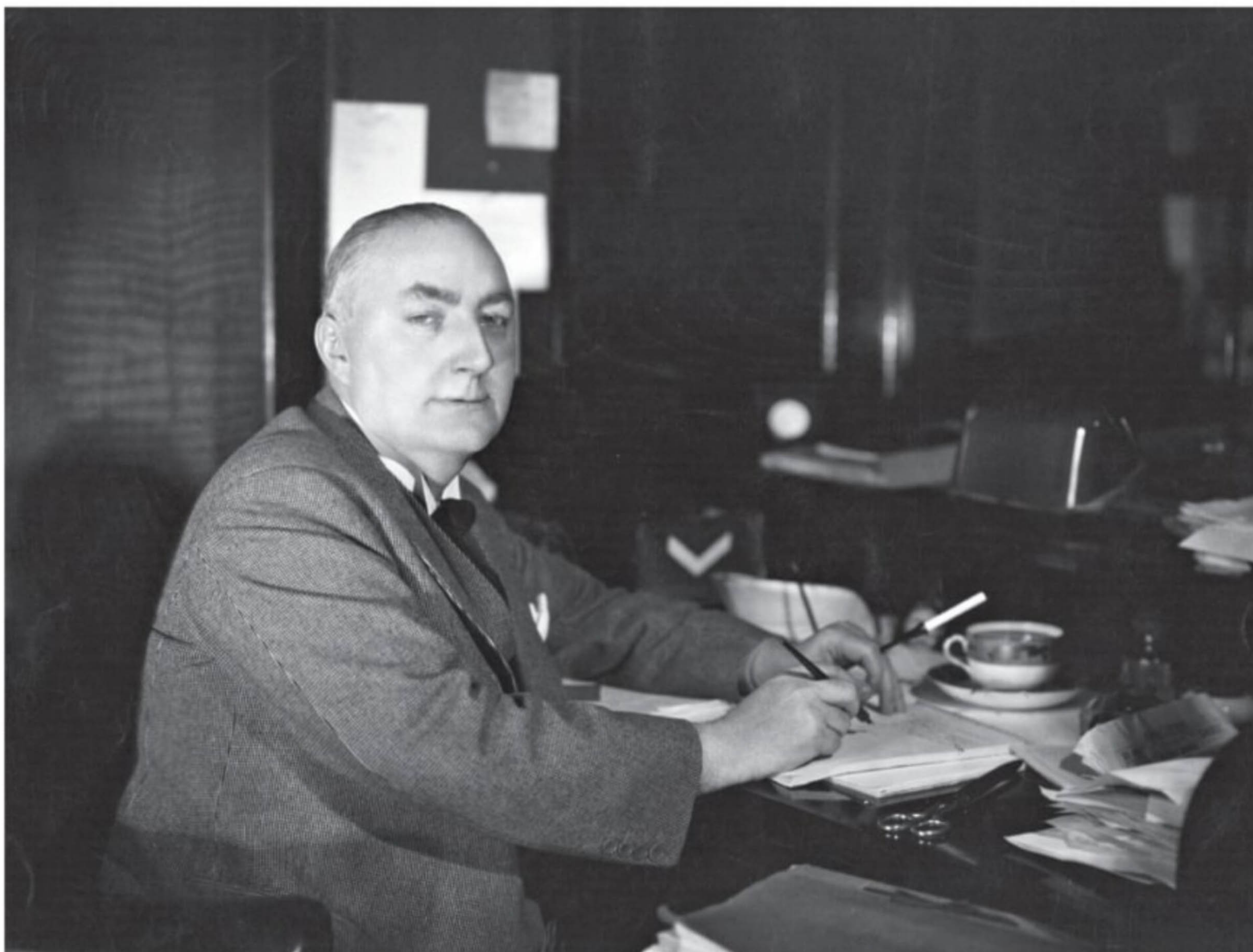
Cooper’s travels coincided with—and benefited from—the dawn of talking pictures and the birth of commercial aviation. He helped found Pan American Airways and became, through the success of his films, an executive of RKO Pictures, assisting studio boss David O. Selznick. Cooper’s roles as airline and

film executive—either one of them enough for a single lifetime—would mesh neatly at the end of *King Kong*, when the plane that machine-guns Kong from his perch atop the Empire State Building is piloted by Cooper, with Schoedsack behind him in the rear cockpit. As Cooper put it to Schoedsack in planning the film’s climax: “We should kill the sonofabitch ourselves.”

In an early draft of the screenplay, Kong is felled by a lightning strike atop the Empire State Building. That was a final flourish by Edgar Wallace, co-credited with Cooper as author of Kong’s story. Wallace, like Cooper and Kong, knew what it felt like to be a towering figure.

Wallace was an Englishman who traveled the world as a journalist and became an unstoppable story machine,

PROLIFIC AUTHOR EDGAR Wallace, who once wrote 18 books in a year, penned the first draft of *King Kong*. Wallace died suddenly at age 56 in 1932, a year before the film’s premiere.







ON SET IN FRONT OF CAST members and the gates of Skull Island, the *King Kong* gang (from left): Cooper, special effects wizard Willis O'Brien, actress Fay Wray, and Schoedsack.

punching out novels, stage plays, screenplays, and serials. He wrote 18 novels in 1926 alone. Ensnared in his study, chain-smoking cigarettes through a foot-long filter, Wallace dictated his crime thrillers onto wax cylinders whose recordings were transcribed by a secretary. And while Edgar Wallace seldom read Edgar Wallace—he reportedly never looked at the typescripts of his dictated stories before they were whisked away to his publisher—millions of others did. In the 1920s, it was often reported, his prodigious body of work was outsold only by the Bible. But unlike that book's protagonist, Wallace didn't rest on Sunday. He wrote *Coat of Arms*, a 75,000-word



WRAY SAYS SHE WAS WALKING WITH COOPER WHEN HE SUGGESTED A TITLE: "HOW DO YOU LIKE *KONG*?" ANSWERED WRAY, "THAT SOUNDS PRETTY GOOD."

novel, over one weekend in 1931. When an acquaintance tried to reach Wallace on the phone, he was told the great man was busy writing another novel. "That's okay," the friend said. "I'll wait."

Inevitably, Wallace was summoned to Hollywood, where dozens of his stories were turned into films. Among the scripts he banged out as a hired hand was a first draft of *King Kong*, which he'd written at the behest of, and with extensive input from, Merian Cooper. A month after Wallace turned in his script, he died of pneumonia in Beverly Hills, at age 56. With a nod to the Alfred Hitchcock thriller *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, the BBC referred to Wallace as "The Man Who Wrote Too Much." In his diary, Wallace noted having met





THE CEREMONIAL RITUAL ON Skull Island, seen here, sets up the film's plot, as Fay Wray's Ann Darrow is presented to King Kong. Adjusted to today's dollars, *King Kong* cost about \$12 million to make. The investment paid off.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

“Fay Kay or Kay Fay, a lovely girl” on the *Kong* set. According to Wray, he carried in his luggage a square of carpet that represented England. Wherever Wallace found himself in the world, “he would stand on it to keep a sense of the terra firma of his native land.”

THE SCREENPLAY THAT Cooper produced, and his friend Schoedsack directed, was written by Schoedsack’s wife, Ruth Rose, and James Ashmore Creelman. In a cruel echo of his most famous screenplay, Creelman would jump to his death from the 18th-floor roof garden of his New York City apartment building in 1941, at the age of 46.

King Kong was a visual breakthrough and a milestone in special effects. But it was equally innovative in its music and sound effects. It was—at the risk of coining an oxymoron—an audio spectacle. Murray Spivack was so innovative as a professional drummer in New

York City in the 1920s that his three-fingered drumstick grip—the Murray Spivack technique—is still taught today. When sound came to motion pictures, Spivack moved to Hollywood and oversaw the audio effects and music for RKO films. Thus began a four decade career working on a stunning hit parade of pictures, among them *Oklahoma!*, *Spartacus*, *West Side Story*, *The Sound of Music*, *Cleopatra*, *South Pacific*, *Doctor Doolittle*, *My Fair Lady*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *Patton*, and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* For *Hello, Dolly*, in 1968, Spivack won an Oscar for Best Achievement in Sound.

But perhaps his most lasting achievement in sound was for *King Kong*. It was Spivack who created the screeching of the beasts that gave the film’s fight scenes its terrible tension, and he did so by various methods. Spivack recorded lions and tigers roaring and played those roars backward, creating Kong’s otherworldly

THE FILM’S CREATORS KNEW how to make 26-year-old Fay Wray (above) look irresistible on screen. *King Kong*, on the other hand, had an appeal of a different variety.





exclamations. Similar methods were used for the other prehistoric beasts, whose screeches provide the dissonant harmony to the screaming of Fay Wray and others. One extra—Veronica Balfe, soon to become Mrs. Gary Cooper—asked for Wray’s advice on how to scream from a hotel window as a peeping Kong peers inside. “Imagine that you have got to get help from someone who is five blocks away,” Wray counseled. “You’ve got to make them hear!”

In this often deafening sound-and-scream-scape, Spivack worked closely with composer Max Steiner, whose *Kong* score was—there is no other word for it—instrumental. By turns tender, menacing, and operatic, Steiner’s score is as central to the film as the gorilla itself. The composer and actor Oscar Levant thought *King Kong* “should have been advertised as a concert of Steiner’s music with accompanying pictures on the screen.”

Steiner’s music changed the way movies were made. “Max’s score was so full and so rich and so evocative and added so much to that incredible film and its success that everyone took notice,” says the critic and historian Leonard Maltin in the 2019 documentary *Max Steiner: Maestro of Movie Music*. “What he did was really rather extraordinary. And as if by magic, a fever spread over Hollywood and everyone said, Oh, I guess we should have music.”

Much of the Hollywood music that followed would be composed, arranged, and orchestrated by Steiner, who won the first of his three Oscars in 1935, for *The Informer*, then went on to score *Gone with the Wind* and *Casablanca*. In 1960, his theme for *A Summer Place* hit No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 and stayed there for nine weeks, until Elvis Presley knocked the then 71-year-old composer from the top spot. The

FAMED COMPOSER MAX Steiner (above, on podium), seen here conducting a scoring session for *King Kong*, finished his illustrious career with three Academy Awards. In terms of marketing, the film sold itself—grabbing audiences before they watched a single frame.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 30



DAVID O. SELZNICK
Executive Producer

KING KONG

with

FAY WRAY • ROBT. ARMSTRONG
BRUCE CABOT

A COOPER-SCHOEDSACK
PRODUCTION

FROM AN IDEA CONCEIVED BY

EDGAR WALLACE AND MERIAN C. COOPER

Morgan





FAY WRAY APPEARED IN HER first film at age 16 and starred in more than three dozen movies over the next decade. By the time she shot *King Kong*, in 1932, Wray was more than prepared to walk and talk the part.

instrumental remains instantly recognizable in elevators and dentists waiting rooms to this day. All of which is to say that *King Kong*, in its conception and execution, its sound effects and score, its actors and animators, and in its very scope and ambition, lay a foundation for the next century of cinema.

BEFORE IT WAS LET LOOSE on the world, all the film needed was a name. *K* is a funny letter, as vaudeville comedian Willy Clark, in the Neil Simon play *The Sunshine Boys*, knows. “Fifty-seven years in this business, you learn a few things,” he says. “You know what words are funny and which words are not funny. Alka Seltzer is funny.



**“KING KONG IS
AN INDESCRIBABLE
PICTURE,” WENT
A TYPICALLY
BREATHLESS NOTICE,
“HAVING A
THOUSAND THRILLS.”**

You say ‘Alka Seltzer,’ you get a laugh . . . Words with *K* in them are funny. Casey Stengel, that’s a funny name. Robert Taylor is not funny. Cupcake is funny. Tomato is not funny. Cookie is funny. Cucumber is funny. Car keys. Cleveland—Cleveland is funny. Maryland is not funny. Then there’s chicken. Chicken is funny. Pickle is funny.”

Kankakee, Keokuk, Kokomo—these are funny places. But Komodo, Congo, and Kilimanjaro are not. Rather, these were places of wonder and mystery in the 1920s. In his 1927 book *Dragon Lizards of Komodo*, Douglas Burden—Merian Cooper’s friend and fellow explorer—wrote of his adventures on and around that Indonesian island.





KING KONG'S NAME INVOKES sheer size, and he looked every bit of it on screen. In reality, artist John Cerisoli's models of the beast stood roughly 18 inches tall.

THE ROLE OF A LIFETIME



FAY WRAY PLAYED MANY PARTS OVER MANY YEARS, BUT SHE NEVER LOST HER SPECIAL FEELING FOR KONG.



FAY WRAY WAS HER real name. She was born marquee-ready—as Vina Fay Wray—in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, near Cardston, Alberta. When she was a child, the Wrays moved to Utah and then to Los Angeles, where Fay attended Hollywood High School at the same time as future film giants John Huston and Carole Lombard. Unlike those two, Wray became big by becoming small.

As Ann Darrow in the tenuous clutches of a disembodied rubber gorilla hand—eight feet in diameter and suspended six feet off the ground by a steel crane, while a wind machine tousled her blond wig and ruffled her dress—Wray frequently felt herself slipping from the ape’s grip. She would ask crew members to let her down gently before Kong dropped her, after which they’d manually wrap her in his fingers once again. This was “comparative comfort,” Wray said, to spending three days in the beak of a prehistoric bird in a previous horror film.

Hollywood’s scream queen had an unlikely start in silent films, and her credits—in *King Kong* and other horror movies—were likewise at odds with her real life spent in rarified literary and aviation circles, occasionally both at the same time. She visited the publisher George Putnam and his wife, Amelia Earhart, at their home in Rye, New York. She knew John Steinbeck and F. Scott Fitzgerald—the latter “an almost too beautiful man”—and was romantically pursued by the novelist Sinclair Lewis. She played Ping-Pong with Jascha Heifetz. Some men wanted literally to pick her up, as Kong had: Composer Leonard Bernstein lifted her off the ground



A YEAR BEFORE KING KONG hit theaters, Fay Wray and her first husband, screenwriter John Monk Saunders (both on right), attended the January 1932 premier of *Sign of the Cross*, at the Biltmore Theater in Los Angeles. Below: Wray and Gary Cooper shared the screen in 1928's *The First Kiss*.



the first time they met.

Wray dated aviator Howard Hughes, who flew her under Manhattan's 59th Street Bridge, as he had ex-girlfriend Katherine Hepburn. Wray was a friend of Pan Am founder Juan Trippe, of whom she once said: "Good name for an airline man, huh? Juan Trippe after another." The playwright Tennessee Williams told Wray, "I'm glad you got away from that big ape."

She married the screenwriter John Monk Saunders,

who wrote *Wings*, the first silent film to win the Oscar for Best Picture. Saunders committed suicide in 1940. Wray's second husband was screenwriter Robert Riskin (*It Happened One Night*, *You Can't Take It with You*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*). A third marriage, to neurosurgeon Sanford Rothenberg, lasted twenty years and ended with his death in 1991.

Throughout her long life, though, Fay Wray remained faithful to King Kong, the most famous of her many

celebrity suitors. She never reprised the role that had paid her \$10,000 for 10 weeks' work, spread out over 10 months, in 1932. Wray declined roles in the 1976 Dino DeLaurentiis remake and the 2005 Peter Jackson version, and in between she found time to turn down James Cameron, who asked her to play the role of the elderly Rose in *Titanic*. That became the highest-grossing film in history (until Cameron eclipsed himself with *Avatar*) and earned Gloria Stuart an Oscar nomination as Best Supporting Actress for the role that Wray didn't want and certainly didn't need.

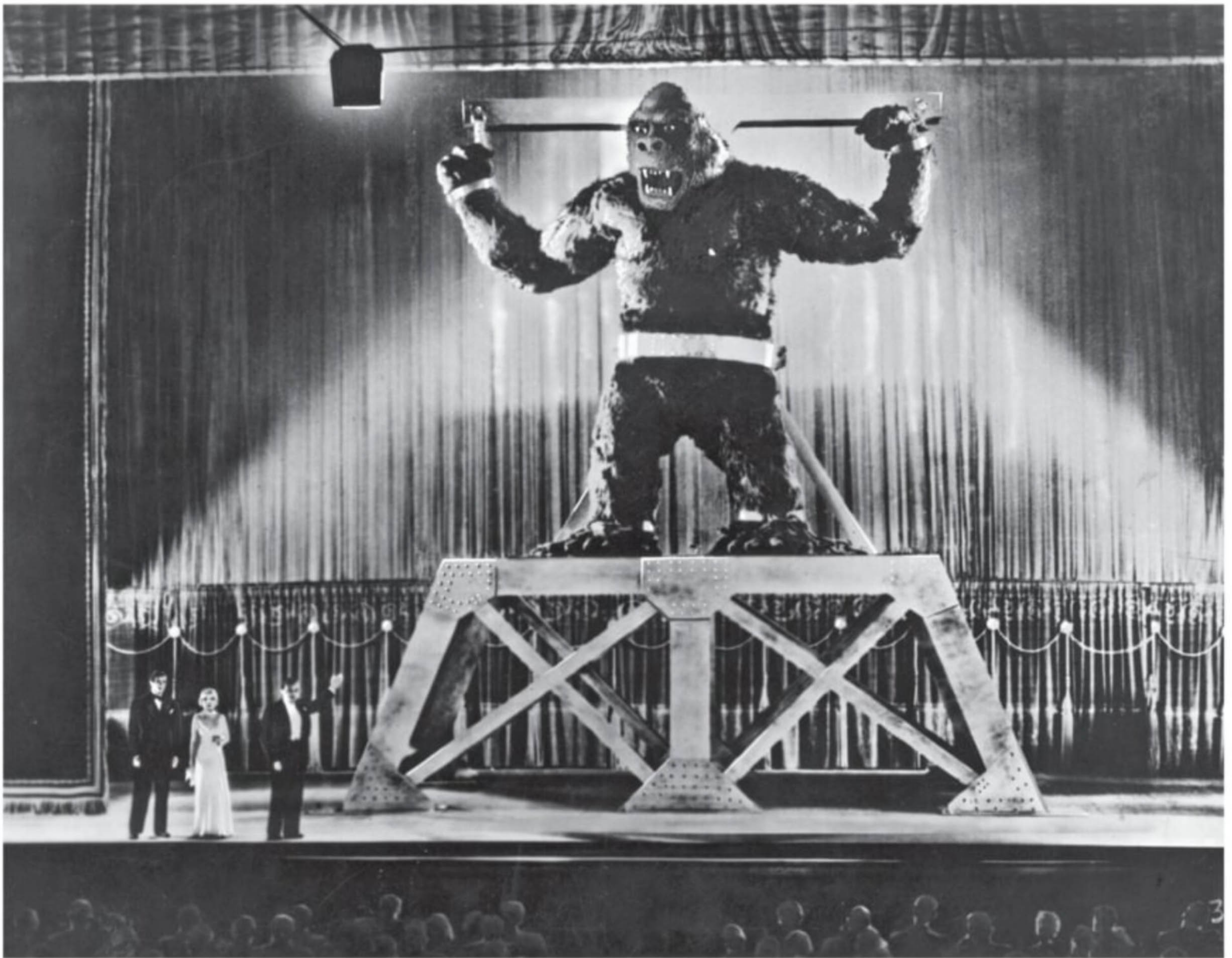
She had no regrets. Of the '76 Kong remake, Wray told an interviewer: "I read the script, and to tell you the truth it hurt my feelings. They took away all the heart and the mythology out of it." In her 1989 autobiography, *On the Other Hand*, Wray wrote an open letter to Kong, telling him, "I feel that you never did mean to harm

me." When they were young, her children saw Kong and told their mother, "He didn't want to hurt you. He just liked you."

Wray continued to act long after Kong, playing the mother of Natalie Wood's character in the 1950s CBS sitcom *Pride of the Family* and appearing in episodes of *Perry Mason*. She died in her sleep in Manhattan on August 8, 2004, at age 96, a day after watching herself and her immortal costar, King Kong, on VHS. Twenty-two blocks south of her Fifth Avenue apartment in Trump Tower, another iconic cast-mate paid tribute: For 15 minutes, the Empire State Building dimmed its lights.

More permanently, Wray's Canadian hometown commemorates her with a water feature. To find Fay Wray Fountain in Cardston, Alberta, just look for the large sign featuring an even larger gorilla. He happily holds Wray in his right hand, as if accepting an eternal Oscar.





CONTINUED FROM PAGE 30

Cooper was struck by the musicality of the book's exotic locale. According to Burden, Cooper "especially liked the strength of words beginning with K, such as Kodiak Island and Komodo, and it was then, I believe, that he came up with the word 'Kong' for a possible gorilla picture." Others have said that Cooper simply left off the last letter of "Congo" when conceiving his gorilla-god.

In her telling, Wray was walking with Merian Cooper through RKO one day when they passed a small-scale model of a Skull Island jungle, 10 feet by 10 feet. Cooper suggested a title to Wray. "He said, what about *Kong*, how do you like *Kong*?" Wray told documentary filmmaker Rick McKay. "I said that sounds pretty good because that has an Asian flavor and he'd done films in Asia. And then he just added the other word to it."

"*King Kong*," Cooper said. "I think I'll call it *King Kong*."

"And there it was," Wray said. "It was born in that moment."

David O. Selznick is more often credited with adding the "King" to Cooper's "Kong." When the film still had the working title of *Kong*, Selznick didn't want the picture—like Cooper's previous film, *Chang*—to be mistaken for an Asian travelogue. Either way, King Kong—like Alka-Seltzer and Cleveland and Cucomonga—would become a comical name in its own right, almost from day one. At the film's premiere, the audience didn't scream, "but took 'King Kong' good-naturedly, and without fright," the New York *Daily News* reported from Radio City Music Hall. "They were obviously awfully interested, and often guffawed with sheer delight at the exciting, preposterous situations."

KING KONG'S TERROR AND delight can be credited to the film's cinematographers, Eddie Linden, Vernon Walker, and J.O. Taylor. Said one review: "[The film's] sweep and speed are such that its implausibilities are forgotten." Above: King Kong on stage in New York City.

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WHEN THE EMPIRE STATE Building debuted in 1931 it was the world's tallest skyscraper, an achievement like no other. So it made sense that two years later *King Kong's* filmmakers, also looking to attain previously unreachable heights, placed their star atop New York's shiny new landmark.

A STORIED SKYSCRAPER



ONE MEMORABLE MEMBER OF THE *KING KONG* CAST IS STILL WITH US.
THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING HAS A PERSONALITY ALL ITS OWN.

WITH THE CEREMONIAL push of a stage-prop button, President Herbert Hoover illuminated the tallest building in the world on May 1, 1931. The Empire State Building, at Fifth Avenue and 34th Street in Manhattan, had been built in one year and 45 days, on a site previously occupied by the original Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. What replaced it was a 102-story monument to the moment, a brand-new building whose ascent by a

prehistoric colossus would marry the ancient and the modern.

At one stage of Merian Cooper's vision for the film, King Kong was going to climb the nearby Chrysler building. But this other art deco edifice—taller by 204 feet and newer by two years—became Kong's conquest instead. In 1973, the Empire State's 42-year run as world's tallest building ended with the opening of the World Trade Center,

twin towers more than 100 feet taller. They were the new thing, as the Empire State Building had once been, and so Kong would climb those in the 1976 remake. After September 11, 2001, the fallen towers and the Freedom Tower that rose in their place became potent symbols of tragedy and rebirth.

In 1976, when Dino De Laurentiis's production of *King Kong* was released and America celebrated its bicentennial, multicolored floodlights were installed that illuminated the top of the Empire State Building in red, white, and blue. Those lights have remained ever since, the colors changing daily to honor or celebrate contemporary events, such as holidays or Super Bowl wins.

On the 50th anniversary of the original *King Kong*'s release, in 1983, an 84-foot-tall, 3,000-pound inflatable gorilla was rigged to the 86th floor observatory of the Empire State. But 90-mile-an-hour winds, tangled ropes, and a leak turned the publicity stunt into a fiasco. This deflated Kong, however, lived on, going on a nationwide tour whose first stop was an amusement park in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

Otherwise, Kong still resides in the Empire State Building, which has been a backdrop for other famous movies in the intervening years, including *An Affair to Remember* (1957), in which Cary Grant meets Deborah Kerr on the observation deck—"the closest thing

to heaven in this city." Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan would reprise this observation deck meeting in *Sleepless in Seattle*. But it's King Kong's hands that are bursting through the false windows of a second-floor museum that opened in the Empire State Building in 2019. In the fingers of Kong's right hand, tourists still strike a Fay Wray fainting pose.

There are now dozens of buildings around the world taller than the Empire State, seven of them in New York City. But the skyscraper remains uniquely alluring. Its owners claim it is not just the most famous building in the world but also the most photographed. "It's like man's monument to what mankind can achieve," says Peter Jackson, who directed the 2005 version of *King Kong*. "It's victory over the natural world, saying [that] whatever the natural world can do, man can build better and taller and more solid. It just makes this flamboyant statement. There is something about the Empire State Building that is just very . . . emotive." Exhausted and anxious as he worked to complete his version of *Kong*, Jackson wept when he first saw the finished shot of the illuminated Empire State Building in his film.

Fay Wray, who lived just up Fifth Avenue in Trump Tower, returned to the building in 2004 and gazed out a porthole on its 102nd-floor. She died three months later, having outlived all of the film's stars but one.





CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35

But make no mistake: The film was, with critics and audiences alike, a sensation. Cooper's ambitions for *King Kong* were voiced by the character of Carl Denham, the filmmaker who sets out on the *Venture* to make a movie about a distant giant gorilla. "Listen, I'm going to make the greatest picture in the world," Denham tells a theatrical agent before the *Venture* has even left the port of New York. "Something that nobody's ever seen or heard of. They'll have to think up a lot of new adjectives when I come back."

And so it came to pass for Merian Cooper, whose movie rendered adjectives inadequate. "*King Kong* is an indescribable picture," went a typically breathless notice, "having a thousand thrills." In displaying the shackled Kong in New York City, Denham bills his captive "the Eighth Wonder of the World." When it opened two years earlier, in 1931, the Empire State Building



**THE PREMIERE
TOOK PLACE
16 BLOCKS NORTH
OF THE EMPIRE
STATE BUILDING, AT
THEATERS WITH
A CAPACITY OF
10,000 PEOPLE.**

was widely acclaimed with the very same phrase.

The premiere of *King Kong* took place 16 blocks north of the Empire State Building, on March 2, 1933. The film opened at both Radio City Music Hall and the brand-new RKO Roxy, theaters a block apart whose combined capacity was 10,000 people. In those

FAY WRAY'S ANN DARROW and Bruce Cabot's Jack Driscoll reunite on the top of the Empire State Building at the film's conclusion, a happy ending, all things considered. The building, standing 1,250 feet tall, on Fifth Avenue between 33rd and 34th streets in Manhattan, remains one of New York's most iconic sights.



sister theaters alone, the film took in \$125,000 in its first week of release. In the audience at Radio City, Fay Wray couldn't enjoy the film, "mostly because of my screaming—too much, too much, I thought."

Three weeks later, *King Kong* had its Hollywood premier at Grauman's Chinese Theater, where owner Sid Grauman had the forecourt stocked with penguins, flamingos, and "rare species of monkeys." Critics and audiences, as several newspaper headlines noted, went ape. The New York papers were mostly rapturous, the reviewers won over, often against their will. Critics raised their own objections and quickly knocked them down, like so many warplanes. The *Mirror* called it "mad, deranged and wildly entertaining." The *American* said "its implausibilities are forgotten." The *Sun* warned, "Go to laugh at *King Kong* and you will find yourself really chilled by most of it."



In the darkness of a Depression-era movie palace, *Kong* was king. In the rest of America, birth rates had been in steep decline since the crash of the stock market four years earlier, but *King Kong* and RKO quickly conceived a son, and nine months later he was born, the first of *Kong*'s endless offspring. ■

KING KONG STAR FAY WRAY, outside Grauman's Chinese Theater in Los Angeles for the film's March 1933 West Coast debut, said she had a hard time listening to and watching herself scream. Everyone else, though, ate it up: Weeks earlier the film attracted thousands at Radio City Music Hall in New York.

The HARD, HISTORIC YEAR of 1933



KING KONG ARRIVED AT THE VERY DEPTH OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION, OFFERING AN ESCAPE FROM SO MUCH GRIM REALITY.

“THE ONLY THING WE have to fear is fear itself,” President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in his first inaugural address, on March 4, 1933, a mere 34 days before *King Kong* gave moviegoers something to scream at in mock terror. In *Kong*, there would be catharsis, but only for those who had a quarter to spare for a movie ticket in that tumultuous year, 1933, when the Great Depression bottomed out and 24.9 percent of American workers were unemployed.

The suicide rate in the previous 12 months was the highest in American history. (It remains so to this day.) A darkness was gathering in Germany, where Adolf Hitler had been newly appointed as chancellor. “Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment,” Roosevelt told a nation eager for optimism, or at least for a temporary respite from grim reality. On stage at the Cotton Club in Harlem that spring, Ethel Waters performed a new song that would become the year’s most popular. “Stormy Weather” was a grim forecast of a hit that began “Don’t know why, there’s no sun up in the sky . . .”

For a moment that spring, though, the clouds parted. Two events happened in quick succession. Beginning in March, for a couple of hours in a dark movie palace, *King Kong* provided pure

escapism, an American coinage that first appeared in print in 1933, when it was most needed.

To aid that psychological escape, on April 7, at 12:01 a.m., taps sounded in 19 states where sales of beer were legalized after 13 years of Prohibition. And though that beer was capped for the time at 3.2 percent alcohol by volume, a thirsty nation rejoiced. For one evening, at least, there was nothing to fear but beer itself—though the *New York Times* reported of the ensuing national

kegger, “The anticipated orgy and debauch were entirely absent.”

The greater of the two intoxicants in the spring of ’33 was *Kong*. Newspapers nationwide held *King Kong* coloring contests. Large public figures who already had nicknames were given temporary new ones: Tigers pitcher Schoolboy Rowe, Cardinals pitcher Dazzy Vance, heavyweight boxer Sunny Jim McVey, and wrestler Lou “the Gorilla Man of the Mat” Bartell were all briefly rebranded as

“*King Kong*” by teammates, opponents, or promoters. Across the Atlantic, a newly photographed creature—purportedly gargantuan, and of dubious ancient origin—was given a temporary new name. “The monster in Loch Ness, Scotland,” a wire service reported, “has been nicknamed *King Kong*.”

NEW YORKERS GATHERED on Sixth Avenue outside an employment agency. Unemployment hit 24.9 percent that year, the highest mark in the country’s history.



Chapter Two

**DESCENDED
FROM
APES**



THE GREAT MOVIE SPAWNED MANY SEQUELS AND
REMAKES—SOME FORGETTABLE, BUT SOME
THAT BECAME CLASSICS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT.



A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN
Jessica Lange, 27 years old and waitressing in New York City, sprung to fame when she was cast as Dwan in the 1976 *King Kong*, launching a storied career that began in the big guy's palm.

THE FIRST PIGGYBACK RIDE on the King Kong franchise was *Son of Kong*, which, like the original, premiered in 1933 and was directed by Ernest Schoedsack.





IN THE SAME YEAR THAT *King Kong* was released, so was its first sequel. *Son of Kong* (1933) sees Carl Denham and Captain Englehorn exiled from a Kong-ravaged Manhattan, one step ahead of the class-action lawsuits that surely would have pursued them. The financially ravaged pair are seeking treasure on Skull Island, where they are befriended by King Kong's son—Prince Kong?—who evidently holds no grudges over what the duo has done to his old man. “*Son of Kong* is not the masterpiece of mechanical ingenuity that *King Kong* was,” the *Times* noted dryly, but the audience, “compounded



chiefly of youngsters... enjoyed themselves, if their pleasure was proportionate to the noise they made.”

This otherwise forgettable film made an important declaration: that Kong, as a recurring character, was fun, not to be taken too seriously, and was unlikely to go away for long.

As the world, and the film industry, turned its attention to the Second World War, the original *Kong* was regularly replayed in theaters as a benign “horror” against the backdrop of real ones. (“Back Again! In All Its Terrifying Glory!”) But after the war, RKO put the band back together for a new gorilla pic. *Mighty Joe Young* (1949) was produced



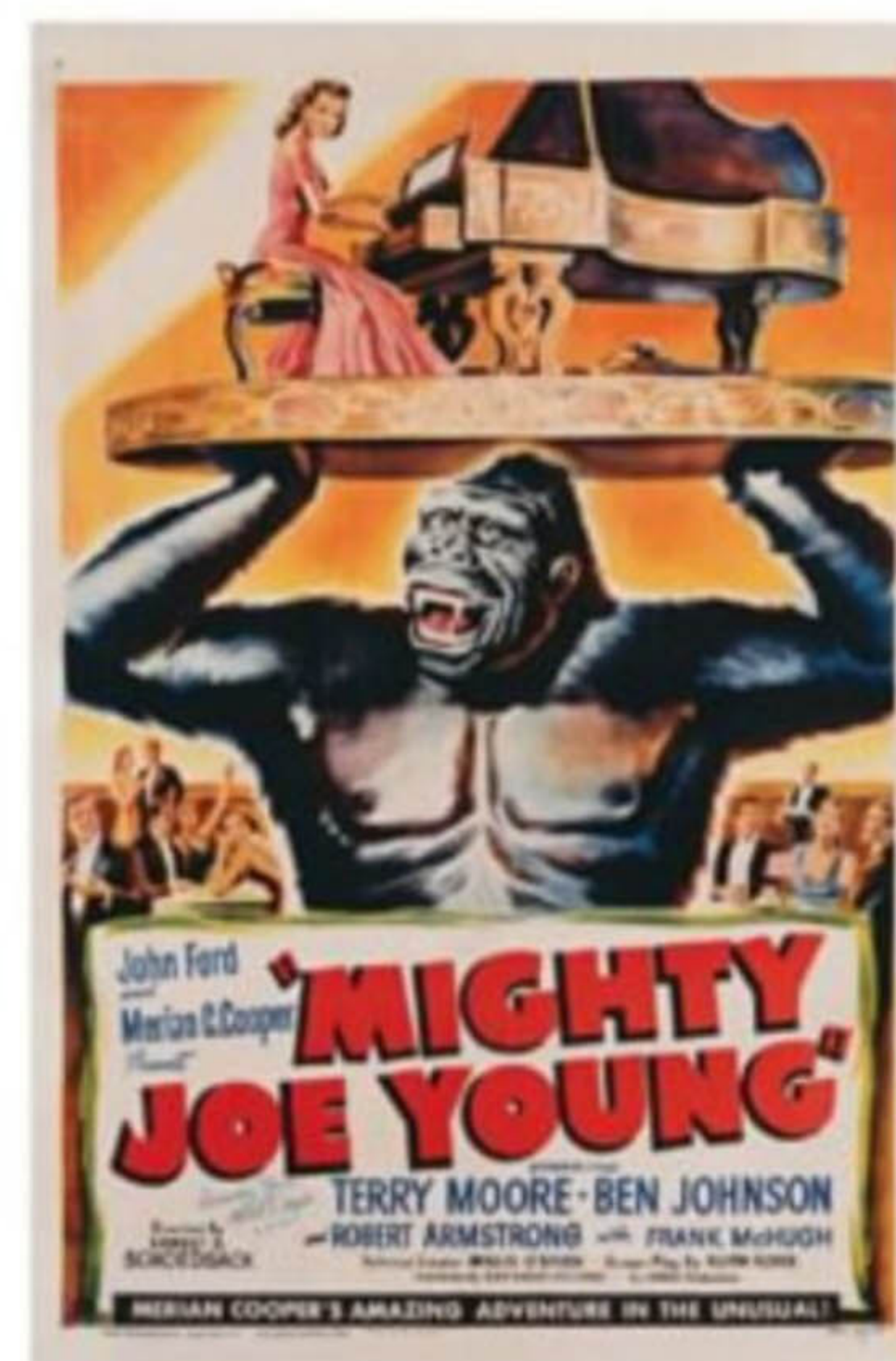
by Merian Cooper, written by Ruth Rose, directed by her husband, Ernest Schoedsack, and starred Robert Armstrong, who played Carl Denham in *King Kong* and *Son of Kong*. The stop-motion effects were again given life by *Kong*'s animator, Willis O'Brien.

Not every gorilla movie is a *Kong* remake, but *Mighty Joe Young* (which was remade with Charlize Theron in 1998) was certainly descended from apes. In Africa, a girl raises a 12-foot-tall gorilla and takes him to Hollywood. In the movie poster, the gorilla is considerably larger than that and raises the girl—in his hand, Fay Wray-style. At the Academy Awards in 1950, Willis O'Brien won the Oscar for Best Visual Effects.

Many of those animation effects were done by a young Los Angeles native named Ray Harryhausen, who

was inspired to go into film after being entranced by O'Brien's work on *King Kong* when he saw it as a 13-year-old at Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood. His aunt worked for Sid Grauman and scored three tickets. In the theater's forecourt was the bust of Kong used in the film's close-ups, its eyes moving by compressed air. Beneath the bust, live pink flamingos pranced. A live stage show preceded the magical main feature, which had magazine and newspaper writers speculating—almost always incorrectly—on how the filmmakers managed to make Kong and the other creatures so real. "We didn't know anything about stop motion," Harryhausen said in 2010. "Unfortunately, today people know too much."

Watching *King Kong* on Hollywood Boulevard, Harryhausen became



MIGHTY JOE YOUNG ARRIVED IN 1949 with Ernest Schoedsack directing and animator and special effects creator Ray Harryhausen (above) lending a steady hand. Its reboot, in 1998, featured Charlize Theron playing the role of tender Jill Young (opposite).





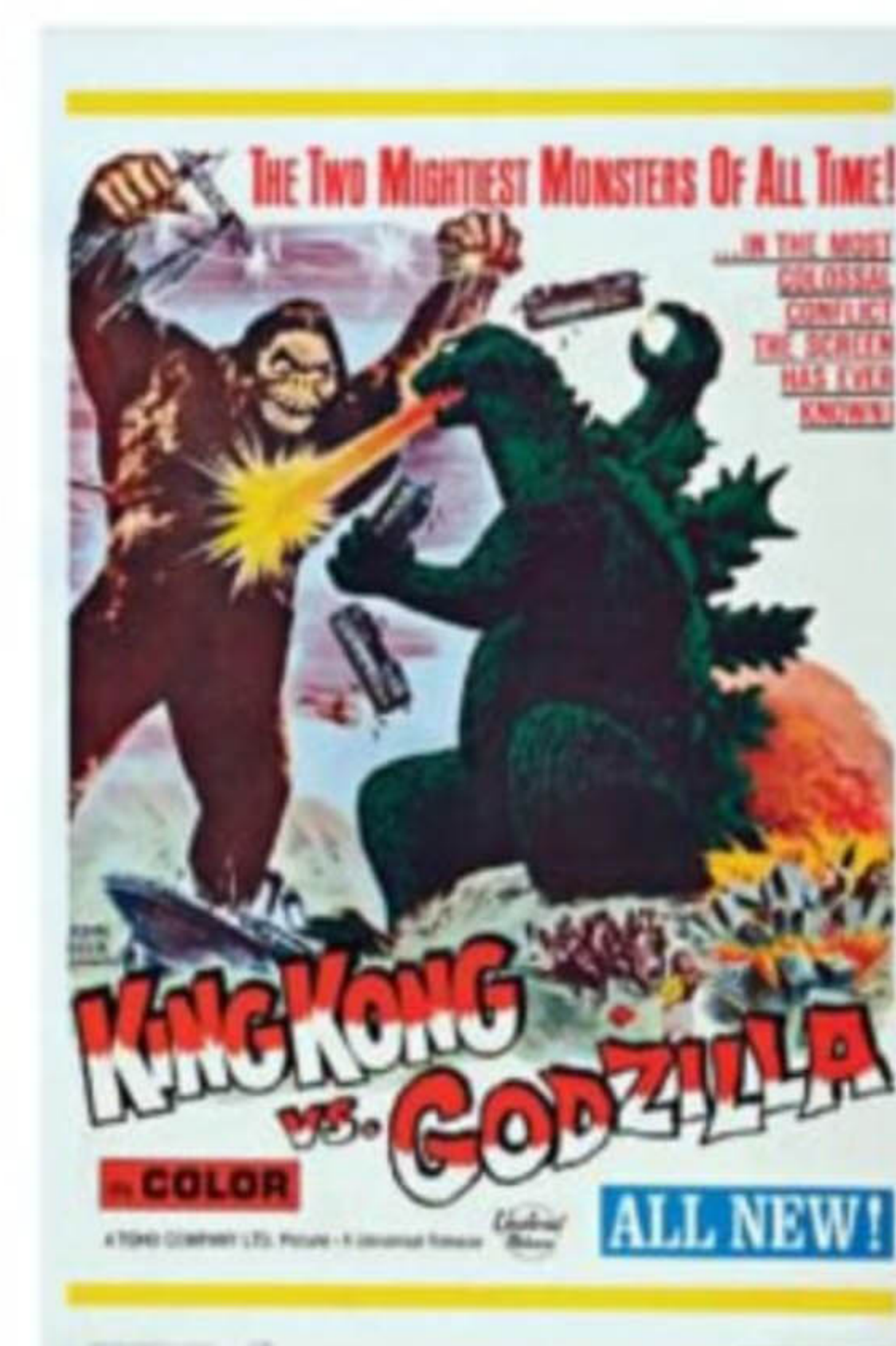
fascinated by the art of animation and would go on to his own decorated film career as the stop-motion auteur behind *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, and *Clash of the Titans*.

Other budding filmmakers were biding their time, too, waiting to make their own *Kong*. Eiji Tsuburaya first saw *King Kong* while working as a young director of special effects in his native Japan. “When I worked for Nikkatsu Studios, *King Kong* came to Kyoto and I never forgot that movie,” Tsuburaya once said. “I thought to myself, ‘I will someday make a monster movie like that.’”

The prehistoric monster that Tsuburaya brought to life rose from the irradiated Sea of Japan, after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and first appeared on screens in 1954 as

a rampant, dyspeptic, oversized iguana. But in fact, Gojira—known to western audiences as Godzilla—is nominally half gorilla, its name a portmanteau of *gorira* and *kojira*, the Japanese words for gorilla and whale. Like a boxer working his way up the rankings, Godzilla waited eight years to get a title bout against the heavyweight champion of the world, fighting on Mount Fuji in the full-color 1962 monster mash-up *King Kong vs. Godzilla*, in which Kong won by knockout.

The next epic confrontation between heavyweight combatants was the legal battle over the rights to the character of King Kong, waged in advance of the heavily hyped, hugely anticipated, wildly over-budget 1976 remake of *King Kong* by Italian producer Dino De Laurentiis. Its \$24 million final cost was enormous for the time—*Jaws* had



KING KONG WAS WITHOUT rival—he’s King Kong!—until 1963, when Godzilla showed up, challenging the beast to a showdown on Mount Fuji. King Kong suffers several whips of Godzilla’s momentous tail, but then uses that tail against his foe and emerges victorious.

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THE FRANCHISE'S FOURTH entry, *King Kong Escapes* (1967), had Kong in a ferocious battle with Gorosaurus before falling in love with the delightful Lt. Susan Watson, played by actress Linda Jo Miller (below right).



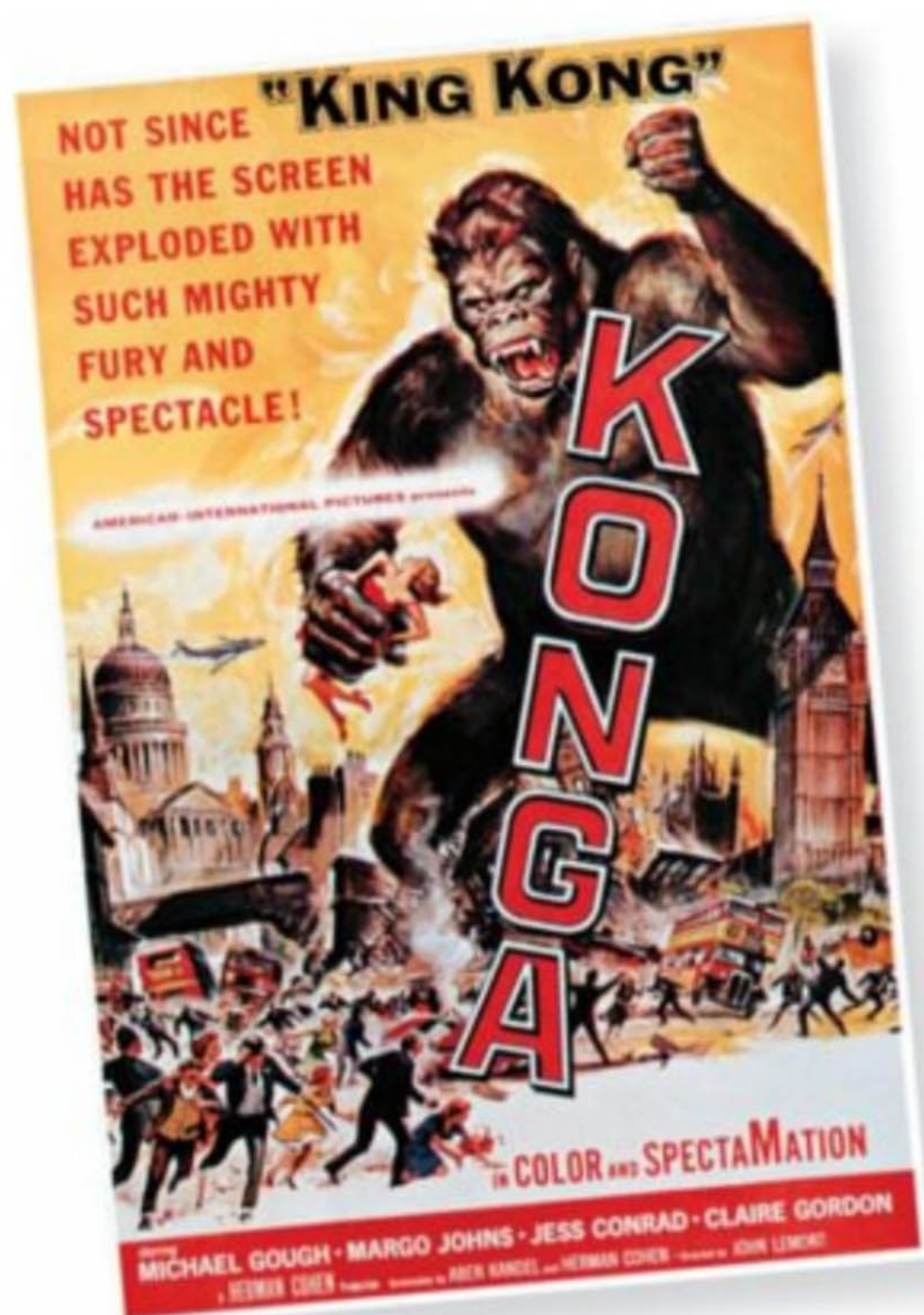


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cost \$7 million the year before—and set this new *King Kong* up for a potential financial and critical fall.

The movie's scorched-earth marketing campaign included manifold merchandising tie-ins: trading cards, fridge magnets, commemorative cups, souvenir drinking glasses, and Viewmaster reels. The King Kong board game from Ideal pitted "you against the most terrifying monster of all time!" This King Kong ran the risk of exhausting audiences before the film was released.

"Nevertheless," wrote Pauline Kael in her rave review in *The New Yorker*, "the moviemaking team has come up with a pop classic that can stand in



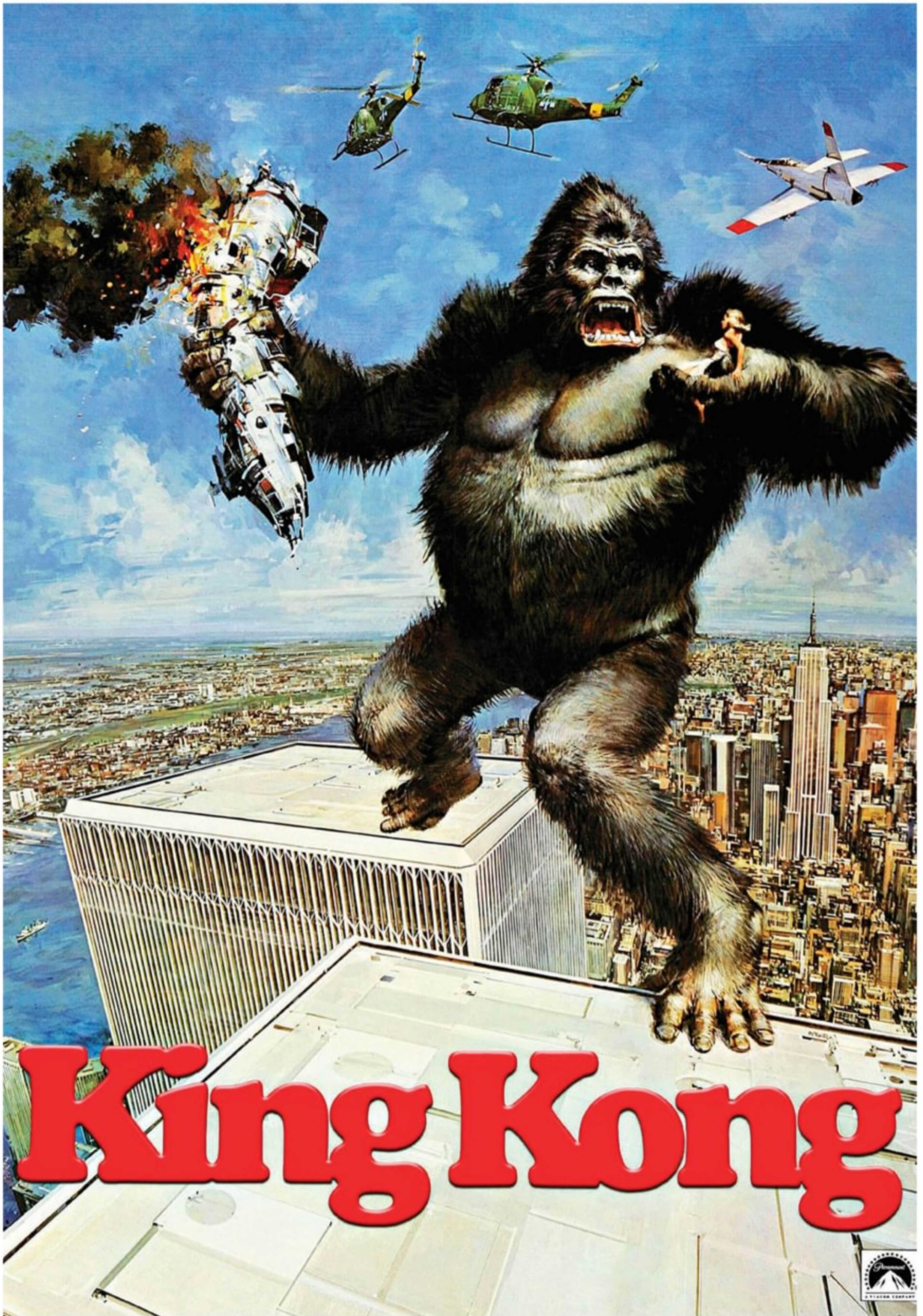
our affections right next to the original version." This was in large part because of the unknown female lead—"Introducing Jessica Lange," read the opening credits—who had been waitressing at the Lion's Head, a bar in New York's Greenwich Village, while taking acting classes and modeling, without much success. It was her modeling agency, Wilhelmina, that sent her to MGM to be screen-tested for the role. The film was being cast by David O. Selznick's niece, Joyce Selznick.

"The kid read the script for 30 seconds and I sent for Dino," said the





JOHN LEMONT'S TECHNICOLOR *Konga* (1961) is set in London and stars Michael Gough (here, in Konga's grip) as the villainous botanist Dr. Charles Decker. Audiences and critics yawned.





PERHAPS THE FIRST SERIOUS reboot of *King Kong* dropped in 1976 (opposite). The film, produced by Dino De Laurentiis (above), earned good money (\$90 million on a \$24 million budget) and decent reviews. But some felt there was a bit of monster magic missing from decades earlier.

director John Guillermin, whose previous film was the disaster epic *The Towering Inferno*. De Laurentiis agreed that Lange was perfect for the modern-day Fay Wray, an ingenue aspiring actress.

“By the time I left that afternoon I had the part,” Lange told *Vanity Fair*. “It was one of those crazy, hard-to-believe stories, but that’s how it happened. I think because I was so inexperienced and it was the first time I was in front of cameras it didn’t seem bizarre to me that I was sitting in some big hydraulic hand and playing scenes to blue screen or green screen. At that point it was better than being a waitress. That’s all I could keep thinking is this is a little more interesting than going to the Lion’s Head every night. Not too much, but a little bit.”

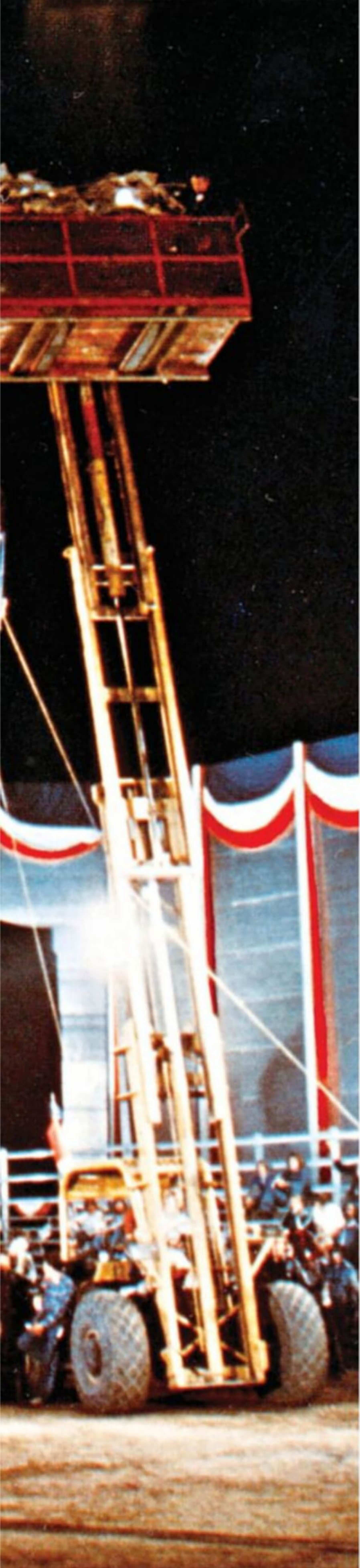
Said Guillermin: “Casting Jessica was the greatest piece of luck that fell into my lap.”

Kael likened Lange to Carole Lombard. But the 27-year-old

Minnesotan, who suddenly made the covers of *Time*, *People*, and *Mad* magazines, was also a modern-day Lana Turner, plucked from the Lion’s Head bar rather than from Schwab’s Drugstore in Hollywood. And thus was launched one of the most decorated careers in acting. Lange would go on to win—for other productions—two Oscars, three Emmys, and a Tony, among many other awards.

This second coming of *King Kong* is a quintessentially ’70s pop culture artifact. Lange plays Dwan (a variation of the name Dawn), the lone survivor of a yachting misadventure: The boat she was on has exploded while everyone else was belowdecks watching *Deep Throat*. On Kong’s native island, Dwan sweet-talks Kong as if they’re in a fern bar—and to be fair, they are surrounded by ferns: “I’m a Libra,” she purrs. “What sign are you? Don’t tell me. I’ll bet you’re an Aries, aren’t you?” Kong, playing hard to get, does not reply.





LANGE HELD TIGHT, WHILE pretending to be held tight, during shooting for the '76 remake, at Paramount Pictures studios (below). The latest construction of King Kong had him standing some 60 feet tall.



The '70s New York subway cars are graffitied and the city itself is in turmoil. Kong is exhibited at Shea Stadium, which would feature a real-life Kong—Mets slugger Dave (Kong) Kingman—the following summer. By the time the oleaginous oil executive Fred Wilson (played brilliantly by Charles Grodin) assures a crowd of New Yorkers “this is an escape-proof cage, certified by the New York City government,” the audience knows Kong will soon be smashing his host underfoot.

That oil company wants to drill on Skull Island but instead returns with Kong as a corporate mascot, like the dinosaur of Sinclair Oil or the tiger of

Esso. The film’s oil company is called Petrox, echoing a short-lived fad of the Me Decade, pet rocks.

Just as Kong was updated for the 1970s, so was his skyscraper. When they were completed in 1973, the twin towers of the World Trade Center replaced the Empire State as the world’s tallest buildings. They were the new thing, a natural for Kong to climb, just as he scaled the mountains on his native island. But the presence of the twin towers in the film has turned any post-9/11 screening of the 1976 *Kong* into an altogether different experience. In his final scene, Kong scales the South Tower, then leaps to the North Tower. In one of the film’s posters, he straddles

CONTINUED ON PAGE 60

JEFF BRIDGES, PLAYING
paleontologist Jack Prescott,
graced the screen alongside
Jessica Lange, as Dwan, for
the '76 *King Kong* reboot.





READING FOR THE ROLE OF Dwan, Lange, a model from Minnesota, counted not a single acting credit to her name. By the end of her audition, she'd been given the part.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 57

both buildings, a burning airplane in his right fist. When Kong swats at a helicopter, which then crashes in a fireball into the side of the North Tower, an audience from today may have looked away.

But on Christmas Day of 1976, when the beast dropped to the plaza below, theatergoers sat rapt in front of cineplex screens, eating popcorn. Thousands of curious extras had gathered that summer on the World Trade plaza to gaze, for the cameras, at the 40-foot figure of the fallen Kong. Those close enough saw that he was made of Styrofoam covered in horsehair, Hollywood movie magic, the kind of make-believe that the first film had made indelible—and perhaps unsurpassable.

“Do you remember that black-out they had here once,” Dwan asks her love interest, Princeton paleontologist Jack Prescott, played with panache by Jeff Bridges, another



**“THIS IS AN
ESCAPE-PROOF
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AT KING KONG.
TURNS OUT,
NOT SO MUCH.**

actor who would become beloved (and win an Oscar, for 2009’s *Crazy Heart*). “And all the little babies that were born exactly nine months later? Well here’s to all the future sons and daughters of King Kong.”

Those cinematic sons and daughters

remain legion, though none of them is—or perhaps can possibly be—as beloved as their father. The 1976 *Kong* would make \$90 million worldwide. Lange and Bridges have gone on to careers that in total have earned 13 Oscar nominations and three wins. Special effects guru Carlo Rambaldi brought Kong to life for sophisticated modern eyes. Pauline Kael would call this version of *King Kong* “a happier, livelier entertainment” than the original.

And yet somehow that was also the main drawback for this *Kong*, or any other after 1933: It wasn’t the original. “Of the thousands of films produced by Hollywood, only a handful have left behind enduring, archetypal images,” the critic Roger Ebert wrote before the release of the De Laurentiis epic in ’76. “We think of Harold Lloyd, hanging from the face of a clock. Charlie Chaplin disappearing down a country road. John Wayne with



KING KONG CERTAINLY LOOKED more real in the 1976 version, close-ups rendering him quite believable (if, well, such a creature ever existed). Opposite: Dwan seems at ease with Kong keeping watch—right before all hell breaks loose.

AFTER CLIMBING THE WORLD Trade Center in the 1976 remake, King Kong meets his fate when he is shot down from the top of one of the towers.







CONTINUED FROM PAGE 60

that red bandana he's worn in half his color films. Hepburn and Tracy. Bogart with his cigarette, Bonnie and Clyde posing for a photograph. The list isn't a long one, and Kong is the only nonhuman star on it."

THE DESERVEDLY FORGOTTEN sequel to the 1976 *Kong*, called *King Kong Lives* (1986), had the great ape surviving his fall from the North Tower and subsequently spending 10 years in a coma before waking to a shotgun wedding to a Lady Kong, discovered in Borneo. *King Kong Lives* was again produced by De Laurentiis, directed by Guillermin, with special effects by the great Rambaldi, best known for creating the title characters in *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* and *Alien*. *King Kong Lives* stars Linda Hamilton, between

her turns in *The Terminator* and its sequel. With that team behind it, *King Kong Lives* couldn't fail, and yet it did. One particularly scathing review named it "the awful sequel to the terrible 1976 remake of the 1933 classic," proving that it is not always possible to revive King Kong from a creative coma.

Every generation gets the King Kong it demands, a gorilla suited to the times. In the depths of the Great Depression, *King Kong* was an escapist fantasy. During the decade-long energy crisis of the 1970s, *King Kong* was the victim of a rapacious fossil-fuel company. In the new millennium, in 2005, Peter Jackson's remake ran for three hours and seven minutes at the twilight of the cineplex, in the last half decade before Netflix started streaming and the iPad was introduced. ■

KING KONG PROBABLY WILL live forever, as he did in 1986's *King Kong Lives*, directed by John Guillermin. Critics hammered the film for just about everything, but audiences showed up, the film turning in nearly \$50 million at the box office.

America's Biggest Hero
is back...and
He is not happy.

KING KONG LIVES

King Cab By NISSAN

PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED
Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13

"KING KONG LIVES"

A JOHN GUILLERMIN FILM

BRIAN KERWIN LINDA HAMILTON

JOHN ASHTON PETER MICHAEL GOETZ

CREATURES CREATED AND CONSTRUCTED BY CARLO RAMBALDI

PRODUCTION DESIGNER PETER MURTON

MUSIC BY JOHN SCOTT EXECUTIVE PRODUCER RONALD SHUSETT

WRITTEN BY RONALD SHUSETT & STEVEN PRESSFIELD

PRODUCED BY MARTHA SCHUMACHER

DIRECTED BY JOHN GUILLERMIN

DE LAURENTIIS ENTERTAINMENT GROUP PRESENTS

A DEG RELEASE

DEG

DE LAURENTIIS ENTERTAINMENT GROUP



Chapter Three

21ST CENTURY KONG



EVEN MANY DECADES AFTER HIS BIRTH,
KING KONG—AS ONE MONUMENTAL
REMAKE AND SEVERAL OTHER VENTURES
SHOW—WAS MADE FOR THESE TIMES.





NAOMI WATTS (ABOVE, WITH director Peter Jackson) took a turn as King Kong damsel Ann Darrow for Jackson's 2005 remake, a three-hour epic that grossed more than \$560 million worldwide. Adrien Brody (near left, with Jackson and Watts) plays Jack Driscoll, a writer who falls for Watts's character.

LONGER THAN *THE Godfather*, and with a higher body count, *King Kong* (2005) is a \$207 million self-referential homage to the movie that first bewitched Peter Jackson as a child. “Well, it did inspire me to become a filmmaker, absolutely,” Jackson told Movieweb when his version was released. “To such a profound effect that I saw the original *Kong* on TV when I was nine on a Friday night in New Zealand, that weekend I grabbed some plasticine and I made a brontosaurus out of plasticine and I got my parents’ Super 8 home movie camera and I started to try to animate the plasticine dinosaur. So really it was a moment in time when I just wanted to do special effects and do monsters and creatures and ultimately led to becoming a filmmaker. I didn’t really know what directing was when I was nine; I was more about the monsters at that stage. I mean, the original *Kong* to me is just a wonderful piece of escapist entertainment, it has everything that’s kind of really cool about movies—a lost remote island and a giant ape and dinosaurs; it also has this wonderful heart and soul. It has this empathetic creature who, when I was nine, I cried at the end of the movie when he was killed on the Empire State Building. That moment of shedding tears for him has stayed with me, and to me that level of emotional engagement and just pure escapism as well.”

Jackson returns us to 1933, with art deco titles, a gramophone soundtrack playing “I’m Just Wild About Harry,” and a period Manhattan of newsboys, breadlines, and Hoovervilles. Steaming ferries ply the harbor. Feds smash bootleg bottles of whiskey. Ironworkers build a skyline for our antihero to scale.

Jackson’s Kong still has a thing for blonds. Heiress to Fay Wray and Jessica Lange, the Australian star Naomi Watts is Kong’s second banana, as the out-of-work vaudevillian Ann

Darrow. In preparation for the role, Watts met separately with Wray and then Lange. At the end of their dinner together, Wray gave Watts her blessing to play the role, almost as if Watts were asking for Kong’s hand in marriage.

Jack Black is Carl Denham, intentionally dressed and bewigged to look uncannily like real-life auteur Orson Welles. Denham is pitching financiers on his adventure film to an uncharted island. Denham needs an actor who is a size 4 to fit the costumes he has on hand.

“Fay’s a size 4,” he tells his assistant.

“She’s doing a picture with RKO,” the assistant replies.

“Cooper, huh?” replies Denham. “I might have known.”



JACKSON’S KONG HAS PROMINENT CANINES. HE ROARS WHILE ANN SCREAMS. SHE IS SHAKEN, HE IS STIRRED.

This is meta-Kong. Denham is making a film within Jackson’s film while expressly referring to Cooper’s original film. As in the original, Denham rescues Darrow when she’s caught stealing an apple from a market. Her line upon showing up at the *Venture* on the night of departure is another line lifted from the original: “Is this the moving picture ship?” On board the ship are a native shield, various spears, and two gas bombs from the original film, pieces from Jackson’s personal collection of 1933 *Kong* props.

Jack Black’s Denham is not so much Denham or Welles as he is Merian Cooper: “I’m offering you money, adventure, fame, the thrill of a lifetime, and a long sea voyage,” he tells Captain

Englehorn aboard the *Venture*, in the hold of which is a collection of cages awaiting live-transport cargo to be sold to zoos and circuses. En route to Singapore, Jimmy, a young crewman played by Jamie Bell, tells of a castaway who seven years earlier saw an island shrouded in fog, with an ancient wall a hundred feet high. “The castaway, he spoke of a creature, neither beast nor man, but something monstrous, living behind that wall,” Jimmy says. Denham, scoffing, replies, “Monsters belong in B movies.”

As in *Apocalypse Now*, based on Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*, this journey into the unknown is building to an unspoken horror. “There seems to be an element of Conrad in the original inspiration for *Kong*,” Jackson noted. “You can almost believe [*Darkness* and *Kong*] were somehow connected.” And so he has Jimmy reading the novel, stolen from the New York Public Library, aboard the *Venture* as it charts a course for Skull Island, situated “somewhere south of Sumatra,” a romantic phrase Jackson held in his head from early childhood.

When they finally wade ashore on Skull Island, nearly an hour into the film, Jimmy asks, “Why does Marlowe keep going up the river? Why doesn’t he turn back?” This is the question for every filmmaker and movie fan still drawn to Kong.

Skulls, skeletons impaled on spikes, the forbidding wall: Denham pans all of it, cranking his ancient camera in delight. But then he meets the zombie tribe, who are not the supplicant islanders of previous films, more the deeply demented undead of a horror movie, with some unspoken baggage in their past. In Jackson’s mind, their ancestors arrived on the island a few hundred years earlier, and the tribe has “descended into something approaching madness.”

Those people abduct Ann, as tradition demands, and truss her up by the wrists. An hour and ten minutes into the movie, there is a bustle in the





JACKSON'S REIMAGINING OF the '33 classic earned four Oscar nominations and won three, for visual effects, sound mixing, and sound editing. Jack Black, John Sumner, and Kyle Chandler (here, from left) were featured in the film, shot entirely in New Zealand.

A large, dark, scaly Tyrannosaurus Rex is the central focus of the image. It is positioned in a lush, green jungle environment with a waterfall in the background. The dinosaur's head is turned towards the right, showing its sharp teeth and a small, dark eye. Its body is covered in a pattern of large, overlapping scales. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on the dinosaur's scales and deep shadows in the surrounding foliage.

ANN DARROW FINDS HERSELF
caught in a showdown
between King Kong and three
Tyrannosaurus rex predators,
Kong fending off ferocious
attacks throughout a wild
seven-minute scene.
The beauty and the beast
prevail, of course.





**THIS IS AN
INTERSPECIES
ROM-COM IN WHICH
ANN CHASES AFTER
KONG, SHOUTING,
"WAIT!" KONG
IS SAD, BROODING,
CONTEMPLATIVE.**





CONTINUED FROM PAGE 70

hedgerows, beyond the sacrificial altar. Kong appears through the trees. Ann screams.

“What in God’s name was that?” wonders screenwriter-playwright Jack Driscoll, played by Adrien Brody. Denham calls for his wide-angle lens.

Jackson’s Kong has prominent canines. He roars while Ann screams. She is shaken, he is stirred. Instead of mechanical hands, as in 1976, Watts acted opposite blue- and green-foam-covered sticks that caressed her cheek. Kong’s countenance, his expressions of curiosity, tenderness, and rage, were motion-captured from actor Andy Serkis, who wore 132 reflective markers on his face. His movements gave Kong his physiognomy. “It’s almost like looking at a costume you’re going to put on,” Serkis told *Wired* magazine of becoming Kong. “And you find a relationship between yourself and the avatar.” Serkis had similarly played Gollum in Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In *Kong*, he plays two primates:

Kong, and the lesser evolved cook on the *Venture*, named Lumpy.

“There’s only one creature capable of leaving a footprint that size,” says Lumpy, smoking contemplatively while pursuing Kong to rescue Ann on Skull Island. “The Abominable Snowman.”

It’s one of many winks in the movie made by the filmmakers within the film. “Nobody’s gonna think these are fake,” says Denham’s lead actor, Bruce Baxter (Kyle Chandler), while encountering CGI dinosaurs in the wild. It’s 1933, but ours is a contemporary *Kong*. To paraphrase Jim Morrison, he’s a 21st century ape. This King Kong is a vegetarian, munching on bamboo. He eats local, but he does not eat the locals. When he’s exhibited at a New York theater near the end of the movie—billed, as in the original, as “Carl Denham’s Eighth Wonder of the World”—no one in the black-tie audience is smoking because smoking had been banned in public places

ANN DARROW AND JACK Driscoll (Watts and Brody, opposite) fall in love and end up together at the film’s conclusion, embracing atop the Empire State Building moments after King Kong meets his demise.





TO PREPARE FOR THE ROLE OF Ann Darrow, Naomi Watts spent an evening with King Kong's original starlet of 1933, Fay Wray, then age 96. Said Wray to Watts at the end of the night, "Ann Darrow is in good hands."

in New Zealand, including in the Civic Theatre in Auckland, where the scenes were shot.

THROUGHOUT HIS EPIC KONG, Jackson plays Merian Cooper and Willis O'Brien's greatest hits from 1933 in homage to those men and their movie. The ape rolls men off a log bridge to their deaths. At the end of a wordless 13-minute fight sequence between our simian star and prehistoric beasts, Kong kills a T. rex by hyperextending its jaw, then curiously playing with the dinosaur's mouth, just as the stop-motion Kong had done so winningly during the Depression.

Jackson's Kong is an interspecies rom-com, in which Ann sometimes chases after Kong, shouting, "Wait!" This Kong is sad, brooding, contemplative, thin-skinned, with an ill temper, and he's also coy and aloof. Ann tries to cheer him up with some vaudeville juggling. Gazing at a pastel sunset over one of Skull Island's picturesque bays, she teaches him the word "beautiful." And the CGI sunset is just that, though if you're thinking of buying a time-share, caveat emptor: Skull Island has a significant roach problem.

It's 68 minutes longer than *Citizen Kane*, and we all know the ending by now: Citizen Kong, shipped to New York, is presented on stage to a black-tie audience, while Max Steiner's original scores plays. He escapes his theatrical engagement—though his chains are made of "chrome steel," as Denham boasts—and heads for the highest point in the city. As warplanes strafe him atop the Empire State Building, Peter Jackson plays Gunner No. 1, as Merian Cooper had done in the original.

More than three hours have passed since the opening credits by the time Kong finally falls to his death. But for many, time has stood still, as it has on Skull Island. "Yes, the movie is a tad too long, and we could do without a few of the monsters and overturned elevated trains," wrote critic Roger Ebert. "But it is so well done that we

are complaining, really, only about too much of a good thing. This is one of the great modern epics.”

There is a moment in the first half of the film when Denham says of a colleague killed by a dinosaur on Skull Island, “Herbert didn’t die for nothing. He died for what he believed in and I’m gonna honor that. He died believing there was still some mystery left in this world. And [that] we could all have a piece of it for the price of an admission ticket.”

This King Kong movie—and all King Kong movies—make the same promise. When he finally captures Kong, Denham says: “The whole world will pay to see this.” And they did. The film grossed more than half a billion dollars.

When King Kong has had his most cinematic fall yet, and lies supine on 34th Street, swarmed by photographers, a New York cop says sardonically, “That’s it, folks. Show’s over.” But the show never is.

AND SO DIRECTOR JORDAN Vogt-Roberts gave us *Kong: Skull Island* in 2017, with Brie Larson as Kong whisperer (and war photographer) Mason Weaver. “Skull Island,” explains U.S. government official Bill Randa (John Goodman), “[is]





**THE KONG ON
SKULL ISLAND IS
110 FEET TALL AND
ANNOUNCES
HIMSELF BY
SHAKING A
HELICOPTER FROM
THE SKY.**





2017'S *KONG: SKULL ISLAND* featured (from left) John Goodman, Tom Hiddleston, Brie Larson, and John C. Reilly. The film took home the Academy Award for visual effects.



the land where God did not finish creation”—a sort of uncharted South Pacific Bermuda Triangle, unfindable and yet notorious as a black hole for missing ships and airplanes, surrounded by a “perpetual storm system” that has kept it off trade routes and Carnival Cruise line ports of call.

This is 1973, at the end of the Vietnam War, and Randa’s military escort from Da Nang, on a “mapping mission” to Skull Island, is led by Col. Preston Packard (Samuel L. Jackson). A British special-ops soldier,



DIRECTOR JORDAN VOGT-Roberts (opposite, far left) shot *Kong: Skull Island* in Vietnam, Hawaii, and Australia. The well-traveled cast included (from left) Thomas Mann, Tom Hiddleston, and Brie Larson.

Capt. James Conrad (Tom Hiddleston), is hired to track Kong, which doesn't prove difficult: The ape created by Industrial Light & Magic is 110 feet tall and announces himself by shaking one of Packard's helicopters from the sky, dispensing a soldier into his maw like a Tic Tac.

"Monsters exist," says Randa, to which Packard replies, "No s---."

On the island, the expedition encounters Hank Marlow (John C. Reilly), who was shot down over the South Pacific during World War II and

has been stranded there, like Gilligan, for 29 years, living among the natives and longing for a beer at Wrigley Field. In yet another nod to *Heart of Darkness* in the Kong cinematic monkeyverse, we have Conrad and Marlow. "Kong is God on this island," Marlow says of the apex predator protecting the natives from the skullwalkers—giant, ill-tempered lizards who live beneath Skull Island.

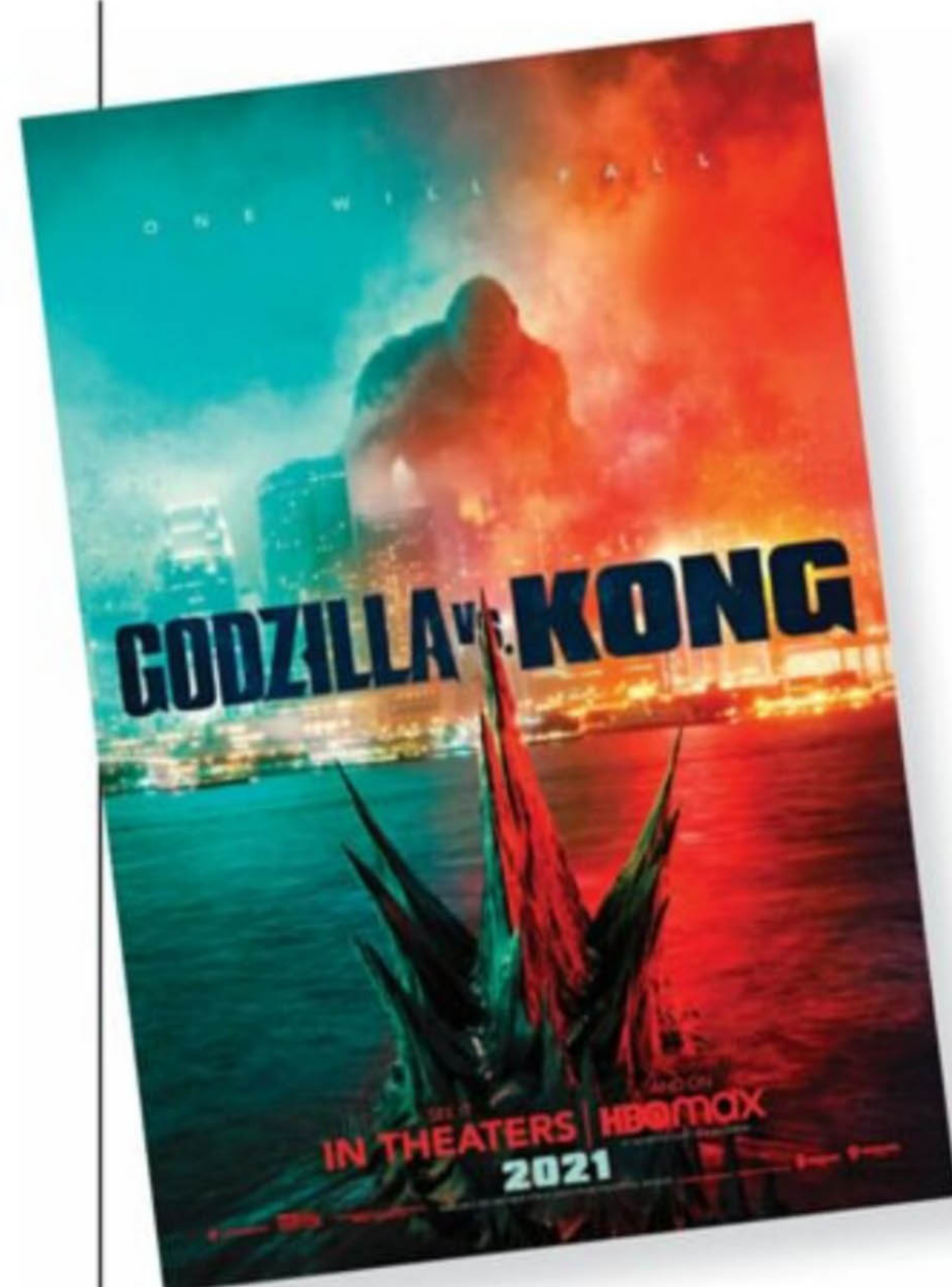
By the time Packard says, "It's time to show Kong that man is king," the viewer can assume the reverse will

happen. The audience demands that Kong live to see a sequel, as do the studio accountants. *Kong: Skull Island*, just like Peter Jackson's epic, would gross more than half a billion dollars worldwide.

I N *GODZILLA VS. KONG (2021)*, the ape has grown, physically and perhaps emotionally. He is now 148 feet all, roughly 14 stories in height, and lives beneath a monitored biodome on Skull Island. It is no spoiler to say that the two leads in the film's



2021'S *GODZILLA VS. KONG* (a sequel to *Kong: Skull Island*) went big on fight scenes of course, in the beasts' first on-screen pairing since 1963. In this go-round, the two enter into something of a truce at the end.



title survive their epic battle, because the pair will reunite in the spring of 2024, when *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* is released. By then, Kong will be too tall to board his own theme-park ride, Skull Island: Reign of Kong, at Universal Orlando.

In *Godzilla x Kong*, for the first time the ape and lizard will “team up to face a world-ending threat so terrifying that neither could survive alone.” More Kong films will follow, and each will pay homage to all the Kongs that came before. Plot possibilities, as Peter Jackson has suggested, are limitless.

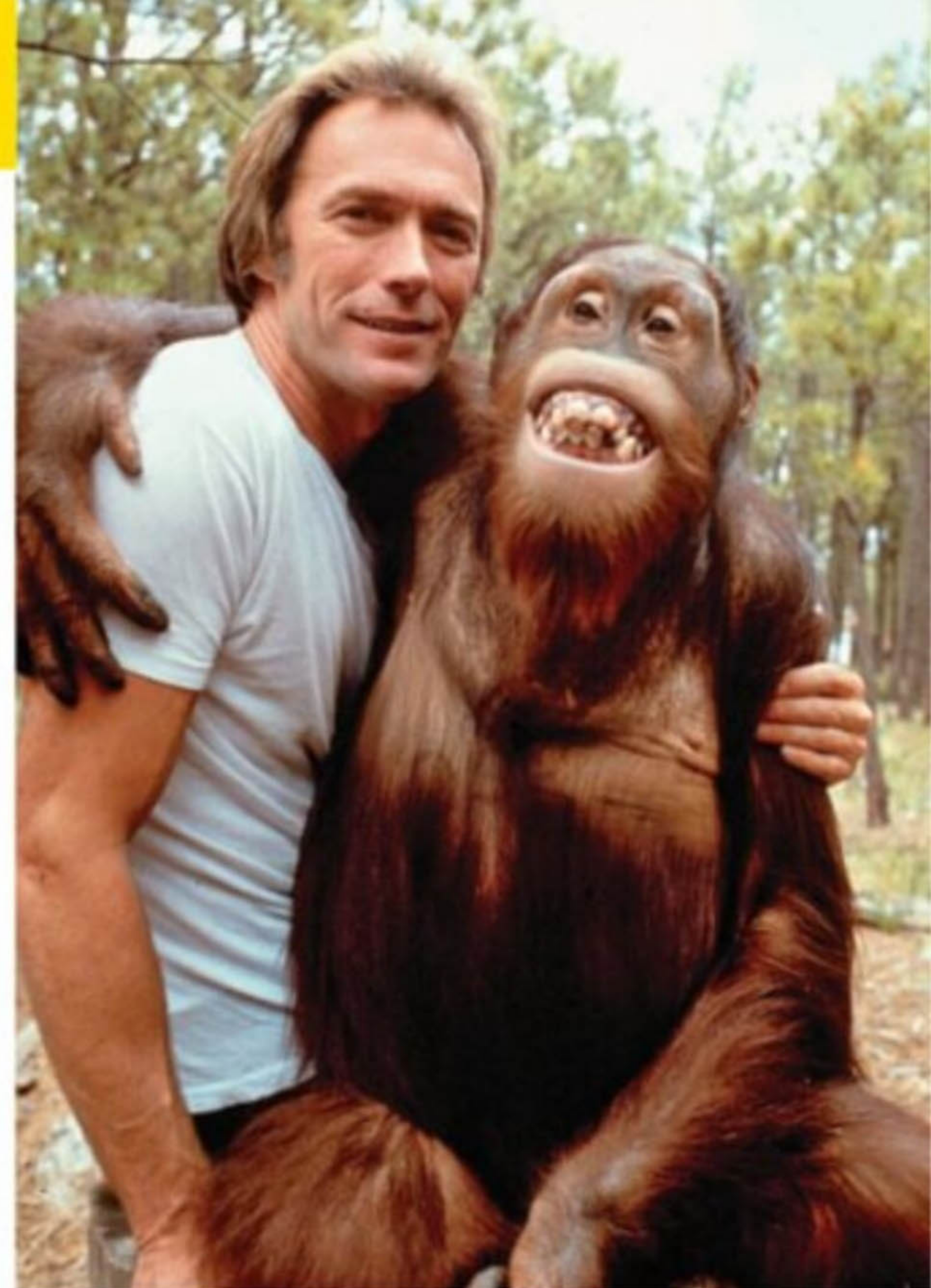
“People say, ‘How does Kong get back to New York?’” Jackson said on the director’s DVD commentary of his own *Kong*’s unseen voyage back to Gotham. “[But] to me the real question is, How do you get him backstage in the theater? How do you get him off the ship and into the theater? That’s worthy of another movie.”

Someone will make that movie, or write that fan fiction. Perhaps they already have. When the simian is seen for the last time in *Kong: Skull Island*, the soundtrack tells us what we already know: “We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when . . .” ■



GODZILLA VS. KONG BROUGHT
in \$470 million and set the
stage for *Godzilla x Kong: The*
New Empire, due in early 2024.





ON-SCREEN SIMIANS

— X —
**APES, CHIMPS, GORILLAS,
ORANGUTANS—A CADRE OF
FURRY PRIMATES HAVE
FOUND CELLULOID SUCCESS.**

A YEAR BEFORE KING
Kong ran rampant through the concrete jungle of Manhattan, Cheeta the chimp charmed the actual jungle in *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932) as friend and sidekick to Johnny Weissmuller's Tarzan. The simian thespian who played the role was named Jiggs, and he went on to act in half a dozen more Tarzan movies, while also costarring with Laurel and Hardy and the Our Gang ensemble.

The 1951 comedy *Bedtime for Bonzo* starred another

chimpanzee, named Peggy, and a leading man named Ronald Reagan. Its sequel, *Bonzo Goes to College*, was released in 1952, and nearly three decades later Reagan was campaigning for President of the United States when demonstrators in Michigan heckled him as "Bonzo." The future two-term President replied, "Well, they better watch out: Bonzo grew up to be King Kong."

Intelligent apes are the overlords of humans in *Planet of the Apes* (1968), whose box



GREAT APES IN GREAT FILMS, clockwise from far left: Maureen O'Sullivan as Jane Parker, Jiggs as Cheeta, and Johnny Weissmuller as Tarzan in 1932's *Tarzan the Ape Man*; Clint Eastwood and Clyde in 1978's *Every Which Way But Loose*; Dianna Lynn and Ronald Reagan with Bonzo in 1951's *Bedtime for Bonzo*; Sigourney Weaver in *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988); Charlton Heston and Maurice Evans in *Planet of the Apes* (1968); and Margaret Hamilton and a flying friend spy on Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

office success spawned eight more films in the franchise, with a ninth coming from Disney in 2024. Dr. Zaius, the alpha orangutan who ensures that humans remain subordinate, is perhaps the scariest simian on film this side of the flying monkeys dispatched by the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

The King Kong Show was a cartoon series that ran for three seasons in the late 1960s on ABC. Executive produced by Rankin/Bass

(creators of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and *Frosty the Snowman*), this cuddly Kong was the first of several animated adaptations of the character, not to be confused with the Great Grape Ape, a 40-foot-tall purple simian who appeared on Saturday morning cartoons in the 1970s.

Clyde is the beer-swilling, bird-flipping orangutan in *Every Which Way But Loose* (1978). Riding shotgun through the American West with his truck-driving pal, played by Clint Eastwood,

Clyde enjoys punching out Hell's Angels and members of the California Highway Patrol.

The gorillas in *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) were in fact actors in sophisticated costumes—state-of-the-art gorilla suits with forearm extenders that allowed them to sprint on all fours. Sigourney Weaver starred in *Gorillas*, but King Kong's former castmate Jessica Lange was also reportedly up for the role of Dian Fossey, the real-life primatologist and conservationist who lived

among mountain gorillas in Rwanda, where she was murdered in 1985.

When Peter Jackson made his own 21st-century *King Kong*, he motion-captured the movements of British actor Andy Serkis as a model for his simian star. To prepare for that role, Serkis traveled to Rwanda and studied the same mountain gorillas that Fossey had devoted her life to, seeking to protect them from poachers. Man's inhumanity toward animals links the two films.

KING KONG ENCOUNTER,
Universal Studios, Los Angeles





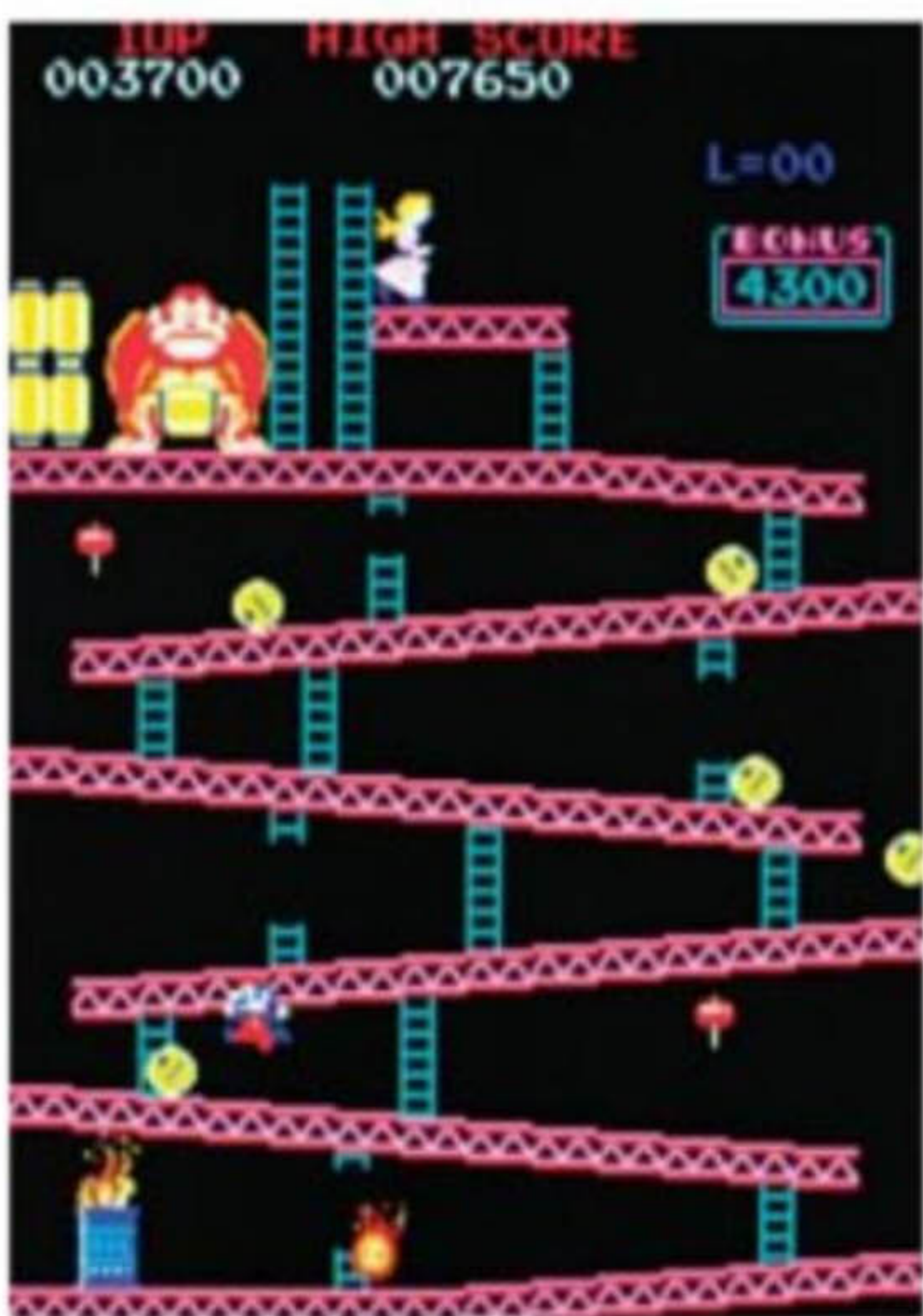
Epilogue

LONG LIVE THE KING

AS A CHARACTER, AS A CONCEPT,
AND AS A METAPHOR, KING KONG
REMAINS RESONANT. AND
HE ISN'T GOING ANYWHERE.

K

ING KONG LIVES WAS NOT JUST ONE OF KONG'S MANY sequels but a commercial and a pop culture axiom. Kong lives in ways expected and unexpected. A scene from the original movie—Kong peering into an apartment—was aped by the Beatles in their animated movie, *Yellow Submarine*. Kong has served as a pop music muse to artists as dissimilar as ABBA (“King Kong Song”) and Lil Wayne (“King Kong”). ¶ He lives on in the ring name of professional wrestler King Kong Bundy. On classic rock radio, Jim Croce’s “Bad, Bad Leroy Brown” remains forever “badder than old King Kong, meaner than a junkyard dog.” The boxer George Foreman had the highest praise for his fellow heavyweight rival: “Joe Frazier wouldn’t back away from King Kong,” Foreman said. “Joe Frazier was one brave man.”



HIS LIKENESS KNOWS FEW bounds: King Kong towers over Universal Studios visitors in Los Angeles (top). Skull Island at the Universal Orlando Resort is one of the park's most popular destinations (opposite). And much to Universal's dismay, Nintendo's Donkey Kong (above) is one of the most popular video games of all time.

As with other fairy tales and fables that seem to have existed from the beginning of time, King Kong is a universal cultural reference, instantly understood by almost everyone everywhere. In *Mad* magazine's movie parody, King Kong was King Korn. "King Homer" climbed to the second story of the Springfield state building in an episode of *The Simpsons* but stopped there, too winded to go on.

Kong lives on in ways large and small, expected and unexpected. In a 2006 adult video, he is Kinky Kong. He is the star of Kongfrontation, one of the most popular rides at Universal Studios' theme park in Orlando when it opened in 1990. In 2016, another Kong thrill ride opened in Orlando—Skull Island: Reign of Kong. Somewhere along the way, Kong seems to have become a naturalized citizen of the United States. A King Kong lunch

box depicting scenes from the 1976 film is part of the permanent collection of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, just like Abraham Lincoln's top hat.

But Kong belongs to the world. The most lasting tribute to him, and the subject of unsuccessful litigation, was paid by the Edison of modern video games, Nintendo designer Shigeru Miyamoto. In King Kong, he found comic inspiration for his own dyspeptic, damsel-stealing beast, called Donkey Kong. When that video game captivated the world in the 1980s, Universal sued Nintendo, claiming copyright infringement. But the United States Supreme Court declined to hear the case, letting a lower-court ruling stand in favor of the Japanese company. "No reasonable jury could find likelihood of consumer confusion," said the district court judge, whose decision was upheld on appeal.



Donkey Kong became one of the most famous video games of all time, and one of the most lucrative, reinforcing Merian Cooper's instinct a half century earlier that there is something deep in the human race that yearns for a giant gorilla and a damsel in distress.

That explains why King Kong has been inspiring rip-offs, parodies, and homages since nearly the beginning of his reign. Before the first manned rocket flights, when monkeys were sent into space, DC Comics in the late 1950s created the story of a monkey who returns to Earth after a space flight transformed into "Titano the Super-Ape," an enormous simian who terrorizes Metropolis. This foe of Superman scales the *Daily Planet's* skyscraper headquarters. He fends off the Man of Steel by shooting Kryptonite beams from his eye sockets but otherwise looks exactly like

Kong atop the Empire State Building.

Across the pond, a gigantic ape with a woman in his fist ran roughshod over petrol stations and London bobbies in a 1961 British B movie that barely disguised its inspiration. Titled *Konga*, its trailer promised "Not since 'King Kong' has the screen exploded with such mighty fury and spectacle!" (Spoiler: *Konga* is gunned down by British soldiers in front of Big Ben.) In the ensuing series of comic books based on the film, *Konga* was drawn by Steve Ditko, who would soon become better known as the cocreator of Spider-Man.

King Kong is the favorite film of the actor and comedian Bob Newhart, who in a stand-up routine imagines an Empire State Building security guard, during his first night on the job, calling his boss for advice on dealing with a 40-foot ape on the side of the edifice: "I was going to take the elevator up to

his head, sir, but my jurisdiction only extends to his navel."

Willis O'Brien, the animator who first gave life to Kong, died in 1962 while working on visual effects for *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. Robert Armstrong, who played the adventure-seeking filmmaker Carl Denham in Merian C. Cooper's original *King Kong*, died in Santa Monica in 1974 at age 82. The next day, in San Diego, adventure-seeking filmmaker Merian C. Cooper, the model for Denham, died at age 78.

The film that these men made with a monkey and Fay Wray remains a touchstone 90 years after its release and 50 years after its creators' deaths. In 2023, during a high-profile trial over who was responsible for a skiing accident, Terry Sanderson, a retired optometrist, apologized to actor Gwyneth Paltrow for describing her as screaming like "King Kong in the jungle or something."



Hollywood's original scream queen recognized the eternal nature of Kong. "And so it always seems about Kong: that he is a very real and individual identity," Fay Wray reflected in her memoir. "He has a personality, a character that has been compelling to many different people for many different reasons and viewpoints. He has been thought to have religious significance; to have sociological importance; to be a kind of King Lear."

King Lear and King Kong—Shakespeare and Shoedsack—are two tragic monarchs brought low, their stories resounding in each new century. Of Shakespeare, the English poet and playwright Ben Jonson wrote, "He was not of an age, but for all time!" Likewise, in Leonard Maltin's phrase, "King Kong is a movie that will never grow old."

If Kong has aged like a superior

wine—and the director/vintner Francis Ford Coppola must think so; he sells a King Kong Cabernet Sauvignon—it's because the character has done what the wall on Skull Island did not do. It has held up.

When Peter Jackson made his version of *King Kong*, the author and screenwriter Ray Bradbury wrote of the 1933 original, "With its casting, writing and direction, you have a film that will continue to be screened to the end of this century and beyond."

"No chains will ever hold that," the character of Captain Englehorn says in the original film, gazing upon King Kong, and he has been proven right. We are captive to Kong, Kong is not captive to us. What Carl Denham said of Kong in 1933 remains true 90 years later, and will remain so 90 years from now: "Why, the whole world will pay to see this." ■

DURING THE 2019 RUN OF THE Broadway musical *King Kong* (above, the show's 20-foot-high, 2,000-pound leading man), the New York City mayor's office renamed a street in Manhattan's theater district "King Kong's Court."

The REAL KING KONG



HE ATE FRUIT INSTEAD OF
AIRMEN, BUT HE ROAMED THE
EARTH WEIGHING 1,000 POUNDS,
AND HE MAY HAVE SPAWNED
SOME LEGENDS OF HIS OWN.

LONG BEFORE KONG, there were enormous apes of myth and legend, ape-like men and manlike apes—Bigfoots, Yetis, and Abominable Snowmen. But Gigantopithecus (literally, “giant ape”) was a real-life Kong, a Pleistocene primate of southern China, identified in 1935 by the German Dutch paleontologist Ralph von Koenigswald, who saw a pair of enormous molars in a Chinese drugstore. They were sold as dragon’s teeth, to be ground up for their curative powers.

Those teeth—and others discovered in China

and southeast Asia—in fact belonged to an ape that lived until as recently as 100,000 years ago. If human beings ever laid eyes on Gigantopithecus—and it’s possible the two primates overlapped on earth—those humans would have stood in a very long shadow. The great ape was nearly 10 feet tall, could have weighed more than 650 pounds, and resembled a modern orangutan. In many depictions, he looks uncannily like the genial Sasquatch taken in by a suburban Seattle family in the 1987 film comedy *Harry and the Hendersons*.



The Pacific Northwest remains the most fertile territory for sightings of Sasquatch, who some true believers think is descended from Gigantopithecus. Multiple eyewitness reports in 1971 describe an upright primate at large in and around The Dalles, Oregon. That creature was purported to be eight to 10 feet tall with a footprint 18 inches long. (“Joe Medeiros, an employee of a trailer park

in the area, described the thing as having a human-like form and a silvery color,” according to an Associated Press report, as if describing a very large silverback gorilla.) By comparison, the “Bigfoot” that was famously filmed in 1967 beside Bluff Creek in northern California was a mere six to seven and a half feet tall, two to three feet shorter than the very real Gigantopithecus.

As climate change turned forest into savannah, Gigantopithecus—likely a fruit-eating herbivore—failed to adapt to its new environment and died out. And yet he has lived on for many years as a lifesize model on display at the Museum of Us, in San Diego. That hairy Gigantopithecus is posed with his left hand raised above his head. He appears to be hailing a taxi, as if standing on a corner in midtown Manhattan, trying to get to the Empire State Building.

AT SAN DIEGO’S MUSEUM OF Us, visitors can see a model of Gigantopithecus, a 10-foot-tall primate considered the largest ape ever to have lived.





KING KONG

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THE ORIGINAL KING KONG VS.
Godzilla, 1962. Here, the two
battle near Mount Fuji, Japan.
King Kong wins.



The HAND of KONG



IN THE CLASSIC MOVIE IT WAS THE ACTRESS FAY WRAY WHOM KING KONG had a grip on—and she, in turn, had a grip on him—but here, on set, it's Zoe Porter, a secretary to producer-director Merion C. Cooper, who tested the great monkey's mechanical paw. The massive hand was essentially immobile (stagehands had to furl and unfurl the fingers) and built to the scale of a 70-foot beast.



THE MANY FACES OF KONG

From his creation in 1933, through the modern sequels and his fierce battles with Godzilla, King Kong has left his mark not only with his outsized ferocity, but also with his vulnerability and dignity. His tough side, his tender side: It's all here.

